

*Choreographing Space* is a reflection on the collaborative work of e+i studio, a New York City-based architecture practice. Founders Eva Perez de Vega + Ian Gordon guide the reader through a dynamic selection of projects, each one opening us up to their relationship with the choreography of human and nonhuman forces at play.

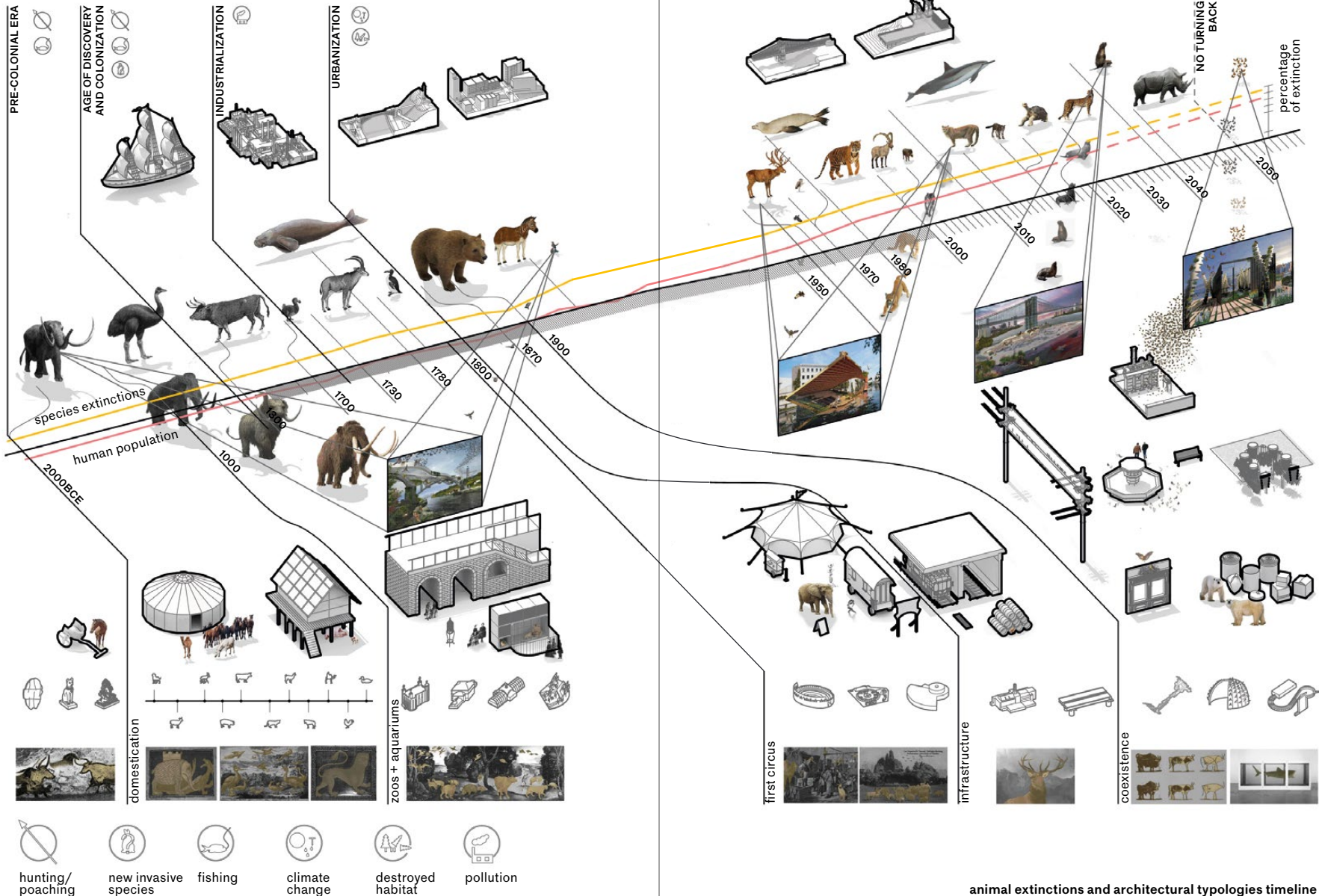
Born as a retrospective and future-oriented book, it engages philosophical thought with architectural projects located in Europe, Asia, and the US, as well as speculative scenarios that offer an alternative, less human-centric way of practicing architecture.

choreographing space e+i studio

choreographing

space

e+i studio



animal extinctions and architectural typologies timeline

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Eva Perez de Vega + Ian Gordon

As espoused through the work of Eva and Ian, the reception of architecture—even the reception of its representations—is rather a full-fledged bodily experience: an engagement of all the senses. Although this claim is nothing new, such requisite sensitivity to the workings of art and architecture are increasingly all too rare. Against the hypersonic tempo of contemporary life, architecture takes time both to produce and feel in its fullest sense. It is why the most sensitive architects tend to be of an older generation, with the impatience and hurry of youth often left unrewarded. It is also why, we suspect, so many young architects are drawn to the instant gratifications of image culture. As doing so eschews the hard work of architecture toward the final result of its representation, by consequence much of today's work can be categorized less as architecture and more as propaganda. As a counterpoint to image culture, philosophical texts have been used by Eva and Ian to frame conceptual architectural ideas.

By necessity, a book on architecture is usually one of images, and thus exists the tendency to take architecture for an image: to reduce it to the renderings, photographs, drawings, and diagrams through which it is represented while not considering as much as one could the material presentational substrate—the actual architecture—from which such images emerge. The converse, whereby architecture is born through images, is a similar story. Sophisticated drawings and fantastical renderings can often be translated into subpar buildings, only to then be augmented through photography for print and online distribution. These can be compelling in a book or on a screen; however, the results of such procedures unfailingly fall flat when seen in person, comprising but the naïve results of surface-level thinking.

What to make then of the speculative work, temporary pavilions, and performance—the “choreographed spaces”—of e+i studio as represented through the documents of this book, all highly dependent upon the movement of visitors—sometimes dancers, and the occasional mammoth or cougar—in and around them through time? We have two ideas. One is more pedestrian and pragmatic: say that, although their performances may be over, work left unbuilt, and pavilions packed away, we can at least glean some sense of what they were and might be through their documentation—the typical, compensatory means of presenting architecture through print. We prefer another answer, however, and think it truer to the work of Eva and Ian. Like fiction, architecture need not be real nor built but simply believable; like fairy tales and fables, and unlike the world we currently inhabit, architectural representations need not be imbedded in reality but rather in the possibility of reality. The difference is subtle yet crucial: whereas one is bound to represent

and propagate the world as is, the other acts as a springboard for the imagination and as hope for other ways of living.

Even if known, such advantages of fiction are seldom utilized by architects, and it is here that Eva and Ian distinguish themselves. In their proposal for an eyewear showroom, we are told that the project would “most likely [become] engulfed” with plants, rabbits, and not just butterflies but “Karner blue and monarch butterflies”. Elsewhere, as part of an entryway into New York’s Chinatown (adjacent to their home and studio), Eva and Ian write of how the eastern cougar and short-eared owl might “flourish” in their architecture, along with no small number of American lotus peppers.

As with all good fiction, it is the attention to detail with regards to the actual architecture, its affording possibilities, and those species that might inhabit it—human or otherwise—which allows one to enter it. Fantasy strongly anchored in common histories and what is already known: a kind of magical realism for our material world.

To paraphrase one such distinguished American writer, “writing is but the careful release of information over time”. As that author, Toni Morrison, might attest, such care and choreography are lifetime commitments, “not gifts to society but rather its necessity”. The same goes for the unbuilt and actualized fictions of Eva and Ian, who have devoted themselves, carefully, project by project, to the design and articulation of new forms of architecture. Against the fashionable grain of their contemporaries, the virtues of such patience lie herein.

This book is a reflection around a selection of projects from our collaborative practice as e+i studio that is both retrospective and speculative. Retrospectively, it explores the people, places, and practices that have influenced our projects, a revisiting that allows us to see new linkages between works across time, as well as re-evaluate their significance. As a future-oriented speculation, the book also proposes posthuman scenarios for some projects, to support the idea that any reflection on architecture must necessarily involve a reckoning with the ecologies it affects.

The book's organization emerges from an effort to "speciate" our projects, much like when living creatures are categorized into seemingly related groups under their genus. We identified conceptual strands of each project and organized them under headings, or species, which were further clustered into the four parts that structure the book. The effort here is to use these groupings to synthesize ideas and intents, knowing that it could always be done differently. Nothing is static, or definite; we see our projects as being in a continuous process of becoming, as they question relationships to evolving ecologies of thought and thoughts on ecology.

Each of the four parts—Flow, Engage, Gather, Perform—opens with a philosophical text that acts as a prelude to the topics, reflections, and questions generated by the projects. Each part is concluded with a speculative scenario where one of the projects is imagined in a future where nonhuman life, which is now endangered, is thriving in the future. These are not intended as nostalgic or apocalyptic scenarios, but rather as affirmative alternatives to the current bleak collective imaginary given the climate crisis of our own making and the continued exclusion of nonhuman life in the built environment.

This book aims to be accessible to many different readers, as it can be engaged with in entirely different ways: as a philosophical inquiry by focusing on the texts that frame each of the four parts of the book; or one could completely bypass the philosophy and enter into the projects themselves, the places, people, and circumstances that affected them; or even take the more speculative route with the posthuman life that some projects are given, reflecting on our condition as one species among many and the repercussions this has for the way we practice architecture moving forward.

A special place is given to the thought that students will find something of value in this publication. As partners of e+i—Eva Perez de Vega and Ian Gordon—we have been continuously engaged in teaching alongside our practice. It is with students in mind that we reflect on the state of our profession, the need to engage with climate justice and offer an affirmative look at how seemingly unrelated disciplines such as dance, philosophy, and skateboarding can contribute to the many unexpected avenues architecture can take you down.

The book is also a recognition of the influence and the engagement we have both had with movement-related practices that have always traveled in parallel to our architectural work: dance & skate. While the work is highly collaborative, it is also very much a result of lived experiences, which are often intimately tied to disciplines tangential to architecture.

We have to acknowledge the role of the urban landscapes that sustain us as people and as a practice. Firstly, Rome, the city where we met as school kids, starting our partnership well before either of us trained as architects. Next, New York City, where we expected to stay for two years, but twenty years later this is still the place where we—like most who feel foreign in their own cities—feel at home, and Chinatown, a place with a culture that we embraced, and that has allowed us to move outside of our innate Eurocentric thinking.

A special acknowledgment goes to the many collaborators who have been an integral part of our work: Ziyu Chen, Susana Chinchilla, Aviva Novick, Erika Hrivikova, Sidhant Seth, Hakan Westergren, Andreas Fernandez, Jonathon Koewler, Flavia Bertorello, Jacinda Ross, and especially to Yotam Ben-Hur, whose enthusiasm and personal involvement in the earlier stages of the book produced a first manuscript. And to the dancers with whom I shared many training hours at the Martha Graham studio, and who later became collaborators: Eva Perrotta, Sophie Bortolussi, Kristina Skovby, Maya Sørensen, and the extraordinary dance teacher Kim Jones. We are grateful to the friendships that have started through professional collaborations: to Yana and Harry Schnitzler for our continued friendship that began with the project that gives name to this book; to Jesse Reiser, Nanako Umemoto, Debbie Reiser, and Daniel and Nina Libeskind for showing us that great architecture can be done with kindness and generosity, and a special thanks to Nanako and Nina for being so supportive during trying times.

To our daily reminders that we need to rethink the way we tread on this planet, Siena and Yan, thank you for adapting to our live-work lives and making it a seamless joy. This book is dedicated to the memory of Sumac Caceres and to the special bond we will always have in our mutual passion for dance and architecture. Lastly, we are always grateful to the ongoing dialogue with our students, in the parallel practice of teaching, which continues to inform our outlook on architecture and its critical role in a changing world that demands radically different ways of intervening in it.

# flow

choreographing  
space

strada  
dinamica

jeongok  
prehistory  
museum

eyewear  
showroom

## The body of architecture and its images

The technical reproduction of images has eviscerated something fundamentally corporeal to the appreciation of artwork and its architecture. Experiencing an artwork in the flesh requires a full body commitment; even when the artwork itself is two-dimensional, the experience itself is three-dimensional. It always requires physical presence and bodily engagement; whether it is walking toward it, around it or looking up to get a better view. One would have to engage with our body's kinesthetic capacity to appreciate the work or get a full picture of the meanings and techniques behind the image. When an artwork is integrated into a built space, such as frescos and plastered paintings, conditions for viewing may not be optimal. Sometimes the spatial configuration may impede a full view, or the lighting conditions might not be equal throughout, which may cause strain to the viewer. As such, it also demands the engagement of senses other than the visual: the smell and tactility provided by the architecture that houses it, as well as our sense of balance and orientation, all contributing to the experience of the artwork image.<sup>1</sup> An increased awareness of its architecture, how integral the artwork is to the space that supports it, contributes to the appreciation and communicative capacity of the artwork itself.

An artwork that cannot be reproduced is, by its very irreproducibility, demanding of the viewer a commitment to engage with it by using all our senses, and not only the visual register. Given its bodily dimensions, the artwork is essentially understood as three-dimensional, because that is the only way to experience it; with the body, with motion. Even frescos, which are two-dimensional, are not ever really experienced as such, because they are always intimately tied to the architectural space that houses them and by the bodily movement needed to appreciate them.<sup>2</sup> An artwork becomes dissociated with its physical architectural space once it is reproduced and exhibited elsewhere, or seen in a book or on a screen.

This shift in viewing modes—in the spectator and in the space—and the resulting loss of dimensionality from technical and digital reproducibility can be explored by zooming into three moments in history with a glance into the changing conception of images, and our relationship to them and the space that contains them.

### I Unified body

The way artwork is displayed and images are appreciated goes hand in hand with the conception of the architecture that houses them. Leaving aside for the moment the important distinction between building and architecture, our built environment has always played a pivotal role in the way we appreciate artwork.

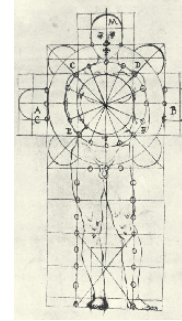
The influential writer and cardinal of the counter reformation Gabriele Paleotti, who set the church's views on the proper role and content of art in his *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images*, is key to understanding the critical role that images played prior to the Renaissance. For Paleotti, images could communicate more rapidly than text and reach a much wider audience, they are more immediate and transformative—powerful tools that have the ability to *convert*.

During this time and prior to the possibility of reproducing images photographically or by other technical means, images are artworks built into the spaces of churches and public buildings, integral to the architecture that houses them. As such, one *experiences* these images just as one experiences a three-dimensional space; there is a clear parallel between the experience of a space and the experience of the artwork integrated within it. One is meant to “educate” the other; to enhance their communicative capability with such force as to be able to, according to Paleotti, have the capacity to change people's belief systems. In this sense the images of Christianity were three-dimensional because they were tied to the three-dimensional space that contained them. As soon as images can be reproduced in two-dimensional form, they lose the third dimension and with that they eviscerate something very essential to how humans experience the world—with our bodies.

In his treatise on architecture, Vitruvius's discussions on proportions for architecture in Book Three are dominated by the analogy with the perfectly proportioned male body, known mostly through the translation into an image drawn by Leonardo da Vinci almost a millennium later, the *Vitruvian Man*.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, the new life given to his text in the Renaissance via illustrations often embodied an agenda quite distinct from that of the Roman architect.

Da Vinci's drawing and the subsequent versions, which have been exhaustingly reproduced, invariably show a standing naked man, actively illustrating the proportional relationship between the body and geometrical figures of a circle and a square. It is an undeniably three-dimensional body, but it is worth paying closer attention to Vitruvius's original words:

*For if a man be placed flat on his back, with his hands and feet extended, and a pair of compasses centered at his navel, the fingers and toes of his two hands and feet will touch the circumference of a circle described therefrom. And just as the human body yields a circular outline, so too a square figure may be found from it. For if we measure the distance from the soles of the feet to the top of the head, and then apply that measure to the outstretched arms, the breadth will be found to be the same as the height, as in the case of plane surfaces which are perfectly square.<sup>4</sup>*



While the *Vitruvian Man* of the Renaissance is invariably illustrated as a standing figure, Vitruvius's description clearly has the man lying down—“placed flat on his back”—in a more abstract disposition. He is a two-dimensional geometric figure used to illustrate proportion and symmetry. The fact that Vitruvius's description had the man lying down indicates a direct correlation between the idealized proportions of the human body and the regulating geometries of the floorplan. His purpose seems to be that of providing a planimetric organizing tool—a diagram—something to be mapped on a floor plan for the correct layout of its proportions. In a sense, the man described by Vitruvius

is more abstract and two-dimensional than the three-dimensional standing image produced in the Renaissance. We do not know what the drawing would have been like had it been drawn by Vitruvius himself, but we do know it would have had a more direct relationship with a floor plan than with an elevation, close to the illustration made by Francesco di Giorgio Martini, where the body is quite literally inscribed inside the floor plan of a church.

Curiously, what may be obscuring Vitruvius's words is in fact illuminating the humanistic concepts of images from the Renaissance. Illustrating the *Vitruvian Man* as standing instead of lying down is also a consequence of the invention of perspective, a technique of drawing that mimics the human cone of vision elevating the human point of view to a privileged position in artwork. With perspective, the subject's particular point of view becomes the central and dominant organization of space, and thus the change of emphasis from floor plan to perspective seems a natural one, as does a tight correspondence between the human body and architecture.

## II Disembodied body

For Vitruvius and Renaissance masters inspired by his writings, man was the unifying body of architecture. This ingrained notion, however, did not remain uncontested. If, as Vitruvius tried to teach us, the unified body of architecture is that which understands the tight-knit connection between the human body and the physical spaces that encompass that body, then a disembodied body emerges when the threads that keep them together begin to unravel, and one starts to dissociate from the other.

This seems to be what happened at the beginning of the twentieth century with the possibility of reproducing images by technical means. The rapid reproduction of images allowed for the almost complete dissociation between the artwork and the space where it was being shown. There was a loss of what Walter Benjamin calls the “aura”; the connection that all images have when coupled with the space that houses them: “Even the most perfect

reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.”<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the intent seems to be to push this dissociation to the extreme, whereby it involves not only the dual relationship between the space and the artwork, but also the three-way relationship that comprises the space, the artwork, and the subject appreciating the artwork. So, how does one disembodiment a subject?

With the mechanical reproduction of artworks, sight much more dominates the other senses, which are intentionally excluded; spaces become flatter; and sound is then a negative aspect of these spaces, as are texture and other sensorial variations. A particular behavior also seems to be required, conditioning our experience of the work. Often referred to as an “aesthetic device”,<sup>6</sup> the gallery for viewing images and the auditorium for viewing moving images have the capacity to deeply condition our attitude toward the artwork.

There is still a persistent conception that the optimal way to view works of art is in a white box, and, conversely, in a black box for movies. These are understood as neutral backgrounds designed to incite a specific behavior of reverence and ritual in the viewer. When entering such spaces, one tends to know how to behave; lowering one’s voice and quietly focusing on that which is meant to be viewed. There is an assumption that there is a singular “right way” to experience a movie defined by a particular relationship between the image or moving image, the spectator, and the physical environment that houses them. We associate these environments with the artwork without realizing that it took many decades and many variations before we landed on these seemingly stable typologies and for them to establish themselves as the singular way of consuming still and moving images.

Interestingly, these two typologies seem to have paralleled themselves in time, and what is referred to as the golden age of the “white box” coincided with the most glorious season of the “black box”, from the 1920s until the 1970s.<sup>7</sup> The crisis that the work of art has gone through with mechanical reproduction is similar to that of the cinema, now that its golden age is behind us. Much like artworks, movies can now be experienced without the apparatus of the movie theater auditorium and can instead be streamed on tablets, computers, and phones, which has put the act of going to the cinema in crisis.<sup>8</sup> The art gallery or the auditorium can profoundly influence the viewer’s reaction to the content being housed or shown, by imposing precise styles of viewing and of listening.<sup>9</sup> What is the optimal physical condition for spaces that house images and how are they designed to induce in the spectator a specific kind of behavior and elicit a particular kind of experience?

## II.I The emergence of the white-box space for images

The architecturally integrated artwork of the sixteenth century gave way to the “picture gallery” of the eighteenth century, where the work of art was used to adorn and enhance interior spaces. Thus, while full integration



was no longer dominant, there was a reciprocal relationship between the space and the image contained in it insofar as one is used to enhance the other: the picture adorned the space, the space enabled the picture to be contemplated within a particular environment, or aura, around it.<sup>10</sup> However, this relationship is no longer held by a tight fit as the two are no longer codependent. There is a slight dissociation between the space and the artwork: the artwork gets framed allowing for its easy transportation and relocation, making the space that houses it become associated with temporality rather than permanence. Images and space for contemplation of images are no longer coupled together as was the case with frescoes of the Renaissance or mosaics of the Middle Ages in religious and public places. As a consequence, the space loses dimensionality, as exemplified by the typology of the white cube.

The loss of dimensionality in the image and in the experience of the image or artwork went hand in hand with a *flattening* of the space that housed them.

The rapid reproduction of images at the beginning of the twentieth century with photography allowed for almost complete disassociation between the artwork and the space where it is being shown. In losing the authenticity, there is also a loss of what Walter Benjamin calls the “aura”; the connection that all images have when coupled to the space that houses them:

*Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.*

With this separation between image and space, there is a distancing between the spectator and the image, giving way to the typology that is most taken for granted, the white cube. Here, the walls, ceilings, and floors are deprived of any color beyond a neutral white or gray, resulting in complete dissociation between the artwork and the space. As we arrive to the white cube as an aesthetic device of modernity, it becomes more specifically about vision, and not the complete sensorial experiencing which the architecturally integrated artwork of the sixteenth century demanded. This typology seems to be designed to have a specific ritualistic effect on the viewer; a sense of reverence toward the images on the wall and a complete negation of senses other than sight. There is something about its whiteness and “purity” that



makes the spectator behave in a particular way; there is a tendency to leave more distance between the viewer and the artwork, and very often talking in a whisper as if it were a place of worship.

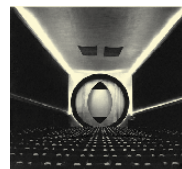
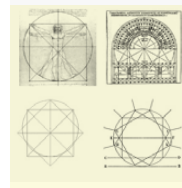
## II.II The emergence of the black box for moving images

In a parallel with the “white box” for viewing artwork images, the “black box” is still held as the paradigm for optimal viewing of moving images. However, a brief look at the history of this artform will show us that it took between twenty and thirty years of evolution for this particular viewing style to establish itself as the singular way of consuming moving images. In the 1920s, there was no single viewing style for film. The “cinema” was wherever the projector was: in a café, an empty garage, under a circus tent, at a fair, or on an improvised vaudeville stage.

Arriving at the dark, anonymous black-box space of most contemporary movie houses took some time, and yet it has persisted. Still today, we associate the movie-going experience with total darkness, separation from the outside world, immobility and silence, and being in a large communal space with other strangers. There is an implicit and socially agreed-upon understanding that as soon as images are projected on the screen, there are certain behavioral norms to follow and a “right way” to experience a movie and behave during its projection, which includes cutting off our senses that are not sight or hearing. How did this ritualistic behavior emerge?

Initially, in trying to find the optimal architectural typology for projecting movies, there was a push to assimilate the design of the first movie houses in the 1920s to established typologies, which derived from Renaissance conceptions of the theater. These conceptions in turn were deeply influenced by the writings of Vitruvius, again based on the optimal proportions of the human body—the unified body—conceived through the universal Vitruvian man. The same geometries of a circle and a square inside it are used in the diagram of theater design to subdivide and organize the space.<sup>11</sup> Renaissance conceptions of architectural organization departed from the idea of man as likened by gods; religion replaced by the human body. It was the humanist unified body, discussed earlier, that permeated most aspects of life in this time period, and materialized in the design of spaces for viewing artwork.

In an attempt to bring the viewing styles of cinema and theater closer together and to elicit equal attention, the first designs of the space for



cinema in the early-twentieth century were inspired by Vitruvian notions that permeated the Italian playhouses, which gave rise to the “Vitruvian spectator”:<sup>12</sup> someone immersed in the experience of that which is unfolding on the screen, respectful of the physical and communal environment that holds the event, without succumbing to unnecessary distractions.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the physical environment was designed to seem familiar, recall behavioral associations, and instill tight control over the behavior of the spectator.

The assimilation of the Vitruvian theater was fervently questioned by architects, critics, and filmmakers of the mid-twentieth century, who did not agree with using the theater as inspiration for the cinema. Architect Frederick Kiesler pointed to some initial practical reasons for this,<sup>14</sup> but emphasized the uniqueness of the “place” for movies: “the cinema is a play of surfaces, the theatre is a performance in space, and this difference has not yet been translated concretely into any piece of architecture, neither for the theater nor for the cinema.”

Unnecessary theatrical elements began to drop away and the assimilation taking place was not about it looking like a theater, but rather affording the same behaviors from the spectator that the theater afforded. Kiesler felt that: “The most important quality of an auditorium for film was the ability to suggest concentrated attention” and, importantly, allowed the spectator to “lose himself in an infinite imaginary space”.<sup>15</sup> Kiesler is referencing the physical environment’s ability to create a palpable effect on the spectator. As Gabriele Pedullà reminds us, there is an awareness of the psychological effects that particular spatial designs can have over the user, and a “general acknowledgement of the psychological ends of architecture and its ability to control perception”.<sup>16</sup>



## III Fragmented body | Architecture as an aesthetic device

After decades of aiming to find their place, movies seem to have an established location in the space of the black box. The auditorium’s principal objective for the Vitruvian viewer is to impose on the audience a new attitude toward movies, by subjecting spectators to total darkness and voluntarily restricting freedom of movement. Yet, as any contemporary moviegoer knows, cinema is undergoing the same crises that artwork images did once they reached the age of massive reproduction. Given the prevalence of technology that allows the streaming of movies in our own homes, film is

now reproducible at the level of the individual, who is able to project a film without the apparatus of the cinema. Thus, the ceremonial quality of the cinema and its uniqueness is now lost.<sup>17</sup> It is no longer enough to just project a movie to entice people. Cinema is poised to find itself a new kind of space.

The appreciation of artworks today is multifaceted and fragmented. Our screens and access to information allow us to have multiple scales of appreciation. We can look at the image of an art piece by zooming into its pixels on a computer or tablet, and also remotely experience the way in which the piece is being displayed by literally panning the globe on our screens to understand its context and physical location in the world. This is fragmentation emerging, not as an opposition to unity, but as repetition of different scales of appreciation, which overlap and juxtapose different information to create a unity of the fragmented. Our appreciation of images is fragmented through repetition and difference yet we can achieve a full understanding of the work of art through these multiple scales available to us.

However, there is still a persistent sensorial distance that these remote modes of appreciation instill. No matter how close we can zoom into an image on our screens, we will not be able to feel the texture of the space where it is hanging, or hear the quiet whispers of fellow visitors in the gallery, or be affected by the myriad environmental and physical factors that distract the spectator of a fresco, where the artwork is fully integrated with the architectural space that houses it. Through physical and digital reproductions, it is possible that we might gain access to aspects of the work that may not be available when visiting in person, but that intangible and yet highly present “aura”, which one feels when in direct contact with an artwork image, cannot really be substituted by any device.

There have certainly been attempts to reintroduce this bodily three-dimensional sensorial quality back into the experience of viewing images on screens, in order to make it “more real”. The aim to reintroduce the third dimension that was seemingly lost in photography and cinema has sparked the proliferation of 3-D movies or cinema in four dimensions, in an attempt to envelop the spectator in a full-body sensorial experience. Enabled by technology, movie houses are aiming to reinvent the experience with immersive cinema, to make the experience more “real”, more three-dimensional.

Paradoxically, with this attempt to provide a more realistic experience, we are constantly reminded of its artificiality. In 3-D movies we are obliged to wear awkward colored glasses to perceive the three-dimensional information. If we were to remove them, nothing but a blurred vision of what is being projected would be perceivable. Thus, in aiming to make the experience more bodily by adding the third dimension of space, we are only able to perceive it through a device that is external to our body, the 3-D glasses. On the other hand, when we are provided with the added sensorial perks of a shivering seat, or a puff of air suddenly blowing in our face, rather than

being immersed by the experience, we are reminded of the absurdity of the artifact gone into creating the still awkward effect.

While this 4-D technology is still very much in development, with the advent of the digital in image-making we are undoubtedly in a different place than when images became reproducible via photography or film. It appears that the control is now in the hands of the spectator, able to choose between very different modes of viewership. How can we think about images in the same way now that we are in the post-digital-reproducibility era?

Virtual reality has been one of the new ways to experience images, whether of art, movies or of an entirely different nature, mostly related to gaming. But virtual reality relies on the wearing of devices, usually around the eyes, that shut the physical world out in order to experience an intangible world almost purely through a visual register. The privileging of the visual in virtual reality is exacerbated to such a degree that it denies the multisensorial body that enables us to navigate the world.

Augmented reality does something different. Rather than making us inhabit a reality that is virtual, denying the body, it brings the virtual into our physical world, supposedly augmenting the real. In augmented reality, we are not denying the physicality of our bodies. Instead of trying to mimic the physical environment virtually by shutting off the world, there is a reframing of the physical with the introduction of the virtual: we see the physical anew. To some important degree, it signals a return to the appreciation of the physical environment in which our images found themselves prior to their reproducibility. The images need the physical qualities of the space in order to be understood; there is an interdependence between the space and the virtual image that inhabits that space.

By zooming into moments in history—the Renaissance, the beginning of the twentieth century, and our current condition from the end of the twentieth century onward—we therefore witness a successive distancing from the physical body: going from a united conception of images, body, and space, to a disembodied one separating body and space, to a fragmented one enabled by the pervasiveness of the digital. Built spaces that house artworks, both still and moving images, serve as aesthetic devices to either tightly, or more loosely, control and affect the spectator.

Paradoxically today, while we seem to be in a moment where almost everything can be experienced virtually, the evolution of digital technology is almost nostalgically pointing us back to the times when we depended on our bodies moving through space in order to appreciate the image. With the overabundance of reproduction techniques, enabled by the digital, we are paradoxically returning to the conception of images we had before images could be reproduced with the rapidity that contemporary methods allow. In virtual reality, the device is what controls our experience, by shutting off most of our senses and privileging the visual; while in augmented reality, we are not

denying the physicality and the multisensorial quality of our world. Architectural space is still, curiously, the aesthetic device that it was during the Renaissance.

While there is no singular overarching conception of how images are to be experienced today, there certainly is an attempt to regain the loss of dimension implicit in image reproduction, by reintroducing the experiential and sensorial dimension back into the appreciation of art. It seems, however, that the cinema and the art gallery are still in search of a new typology fit for the fragmented spectator.

## Endnotes

1 Or kinesthetic sense, also known as proprioception.

2 Not just epitomical examples, like the Sistine Chapel, that clearly need to be experienced in their physical space, but also other pieces, such as the *Mona Lisa*, for instance, that require a physical presence; walking around it, seeing its small stature, commenting on its position on the wall, and the other paintings around it.

3 In the context of this text, drawings and diagrams are considered images.

4 Vitruvius, *The Ten Books of Architecture*, Book Three: *On symmetry*, Translated by Morris Hicky Morgan. London: Humphrey Milford Oxford University Press, p 73.

5 Walter Benjamin. New York: Schocken, 1968, p 220.

6 Gabriele Pedullà, *In Broad Daylight: Movies and Spectators After the Cinema*, New York: Verso, 2012, pp 17-18.

7 Ibid, p 17.

8 It has been reported that 2016 was the worst year for movie income since the 1920s.

9 Pedullà, *In Broad Daylight*, pp 17-18.

10 This is a direct reference to Benjamin's *The Work of Art*. While Benjamin's text is of huge value to the development of the ideas in this text, there is also an understanding of the work of art, which this text moves away from in favor of a multifaceted understanding of how art can be appreciated. "Contrary to what Benjamin thought, there is more than one way to appreciate the work of an architect, to go to the theater, or to look at a painting. If this

were not the case, there would be no need for aesthetic devices like the dark cube in the first place." Pedullà, *In Broad Daylight*, p 73.

11 Theater design is covered in Book Five of Vitruvius's text. As Pedullà states: "For Renaissance humanists, educating the public in the classical theater was part of a much more comprehensive project of recreating man in the likeness of the Greek and Romans." *In Broad Daylight*, p 47.

12 This is the title of a chapter in Pedullà's *In Broad Daylight*, pp 37-60.

13 As Gabriele Pedullà recounts, Leon Battista Alberti, in *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, claimed: "The architect's only task was to put the spectators in a condition to see and hear effortlessly what was happening on stage." *In Broad Daylight*, p 47.

14 For instance: in a movie house, the first rows were no longer the best ones, as in the theater; the side seating provided by elegant boxes also become nonsensical for the viewing of a flat screen which is best viewed frontally; and similarly, the typical fan-shaped seating of the theater house did not provide the best view for the flat screen.

15 Frederick Kiesler quoted in Pedullà, *In Broad Daylight*, pp 51-52.

16 Certainly, the shift in the type of space was also enabled by movies that required more attention, and based on narration. However, they could not have emerged without a concerted effort to control the viewer's perception of space through the careful design and associative power that physical space has on the subject, and its capacity to appreciate the object. To quote Pedullà further: "Imitating the theater, the dark cube in fact aspired to propose itself as a place of absolute aesthetic experience that allowed only one legitimate activity: the contemplation of a film. [...]"

Suddenly, going to the movies was like going to church." *In Broad Daylight*, p 33.

17 The aura that Benjamin refers to when discussing art, although, according to him, film did not have aura at all.

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## Illustrations

Vitruvian Man, p 12. <https://www.leonardodavinci.net/the-vitruvian-man.jsp>.

Francesco di Giorgio Martini, p 13. *Drawing for a Church*. Original source: Scanned from *The Evolution of Designs: Biological Analogy in Architecture and the Applied Arts* by Philip Steadman, found in <https://leonardodavinci.stanford.edu/submissions/clabaugh/history/architecture.html>.

Sketches of the evolution of artwork display spaces, p 15. By author.

Black box evolution sketches, p 16. By author.

Vitruvian Man and Theater Plan, p 17. <https://politicworm.files.wordpress.com/2009/11/ground-plan-cest.jpg>.

Italian playhouse theater, p 17. <http://www3.northern.edu/wild/th100/Olimpico2.jpg>.

Film Guild Cinema by Frederick Kiesler, p 17. Found in <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/4699>.

Freud's study desk at Berggasse 19, p 17. Found in *The Emergence of The Interior: Architecture, Modernity, Domesticity*, p 43.

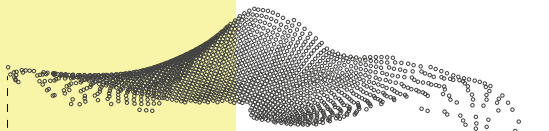
Choreographing Space was created as an exploration into the overlaps of space, movement, art, and performance with public engagement. In the years following 9/11, downtown Manhattan became a ghost town; stores went out of business, those who could found housing in less toxic areas, and the community was left stranded. This project was one of the efforts to revitalize downtown after the trauma by bringing public art to the community. We were awarded a grant to support our work in an abandoned storefront space, our first design-build installation to bring together Eva's professional dance training and Ian's lifelong skateboarding with an extraordinary group of emerging artists in dance choreography, music composition, costume design, and dance filmmaking.

Our goal was to engage the public and explore how the design of spaces influences the way we move, behave, and act. Space-making is not an innocent act, it has the power to affect those who are in it—it has consequences. Like choreography, the spaces of our built environment are significantly concerned with the movement of people through them, yet they have historically been conceived of and materialized through static organizational models that deal more with the idea of permanence, stability, and privilege rather than the welcoming movement of all kinds of bodies within it. Choreographing Space is a project that aimed to challenge inert models of organization in order to provide a public refuge in challenging times, an approach to art that is welcoming and inclusive, oscillating between being a container for art and being art itself.

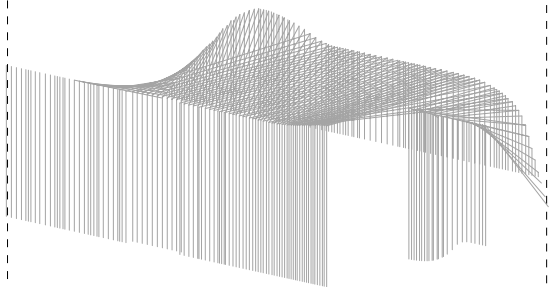
Inspired by catenary structures—a form defined by the curvature of naturally suspended chains—we enveloped the interior of the storefront space with an interactive mesh capable of transformation and made from off-the-shelf wiffle balls and many hours of experimentation. The project became at once a performance event and an architectural environment, fusing performer and audience, space and movement.

The space opened to the public as a relaxing, meditative, yet interactive environment during the day, when visitors were also invited to “play” the space. It transformed into a performance space in the evenings with uniquely curated weekly events: starting with a dance-film screening, followed by live performances with sound pieces written specifically for each show. The space was activated by the movement of the performers flowing along the floor topography, weaving through the audience and manipulating the suspended mesh into a continuously changing environment.

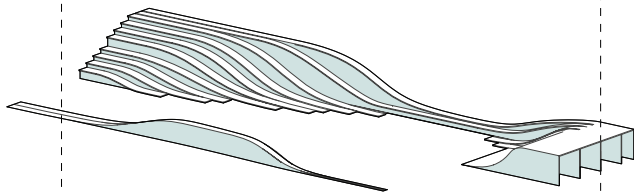




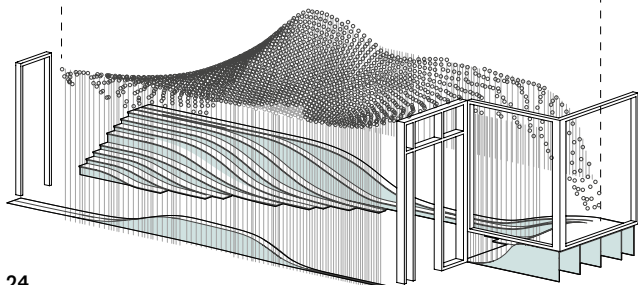
interactive  
mesh nodes



string mesh



stepped floor  
topography



installation within  
the existing space



*Choreographing Space was a beautiful project. I still recall, many years later, the soft white curvilinear motion of the installation and floor space both intersecting out over the audience and to the opposite wall. It was vital for me to be part of an artistic project in response to the 9/11 tragedy in NYC. As a first-hand witness of this horrible event, I needed to heal and help others heal in my community. The storefronts downtown were vacant for years and it was wonderful to be part of the transformation of space with our bodies in the context of art and architecture. Eva and Ian's vision of reimagining the space inspired me to structure a site-specific dance. I brought in three female artists, who contributed their own ideas to the dance. The dancers and I worked in harmony with the installation dancing to a new composition by composer Alex Davis.*

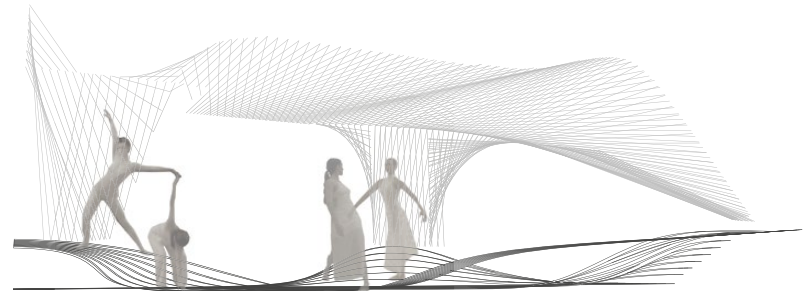
*It was indeed meditative and peaceful.*

**Kim Jones, choreographer and artistic director of Movement Migration**



## Project data

- **Location** Lower Manhattan, New York City
- **Design and fabrication** Eva Perez de Vega + Ian Gordon
- **Fabrication assistants** Pablo Baquero, Flavia Bertorello, Merily Jurna, Eva Perrotta and Jennifer Riggi
- **Choreography and dance** Nya Bowman, Veruska Cantelli, Esther Eiras, Saskia Hannemann, Kim Jones, Stacey Kaplan, Eva Perez de Vega, Eva Perrotta, Liz Ross, Yana Schnitzler, Kristina Skjelberg, Kristina Skovby and Maia Sørensen
- **Music composers** Robert Boston, Alex Davis, Jean-Philippe Feiss, April Koester and David Potaux-Razel
- **Costume design** Atsuko Yagi
- **Dance short films** *No One* by Arielle Javitch and *Nude* by Maia Sørensen
- **Photography** Julieta Cervantes and Brandon Jacobs-Mills
- **Public events curator:** Eva Perez de Vega
- **Organizations:** made possible by a grant from the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council generously supported by The September 11th Fund



Strada Dinamica is the second pavilion we designed for our cross-continent client Ceramics of Italy, promoter of Italian ceramics and culture. After our five-year working relationship on the first pavilion, the client did something unprecedented in their history by hiring the same architects to build a second pavilion for their largest yearly event opening in Chicago. The brief was similar but the goals were different: the pavilion needed to be welcoming but not foster long-term gathering. Therefore, it became a lively Italian streetscape that favors movement and dynamic interactions over stationary gatherings. Visitors are invited to flow through the space from multiple directions and funnel into emergent patterns within zones for coffee, aperitivo, seating, and quick meals around communal tables. These long, interlocking, and reconfigurable elements help create the dynamic, winding streetscape while providing welcoming dining surfaces or “tablescape”.

The large-scale expo that this pavilion is part of usually generates an incredible amount of waste. We aimed to work against this tendency by encouraging an efficient usage of materials; designing all the elements of the pavilion, including the ceramic tile that covered most surfaces, to be reused for several years and upcycled at the end. To that end, the floor was made up of a novel floating-floor system that allowed the full recuperation and reuse of the material.

The project embodies a sense of flow that is emphasized through the use of horizontal lines of sight and a striated design across all elements. This effect is materialized by a lower structure of grooved, curved wooden panels for the kiosks and a similarly striated overhanging canopy made up of a lightweight stretched fabric over a curved metallic structure. The tile tonality for the floor is reminiscent of Roman travertine. The color palette is intentionally limited to white and brown to accentuate the lines of sight and a sense of flow created by the sculptural forms. The only exception is the info-totem that acts as a clear landmark within the larger expo, standing out with its vibrant Italian colors.

As this pavilion is situated in a central location within the Italian expo, proximity to it is very sought-after by other stands, which strategize for months prior to opening. The pavilion becomes a political object of some contention, but is also seen as an art object itself: a spatial manifestation of the culture it showcases.



**Project data**

- Location Chicago
- Design Eva Perez de Vega + Ian Gordon
- Organization Ceramics of Italy
- Offsite Fabrication A&M Production
- Onsite Assembly Freeman

