if these walls could talk

CAN ARTISTS AND DESIGNERS WORK TOGETHER TO
SEE THROUGH THE FOG OF WAR? A GROUP OF FORENSIC
ARCHITECTS IS ON A MISSION TO FIND OUT.

Writer Patrick Pittman *Illustrator* George Wylesol

THE SAYDNAYA MILITARY PRISON IN SYRIA IS A LITERAL AND FIGURATIVE BLACK SPOT.

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An assembly line of torture where thousands have died since 2011, it has been called, by the few who have made it out, the worst place on earth. Initially, escapees didn't have many more words to describe it: they spent most of their time inside blindfolded. This detail may seem trivial compared to the other abuses they endured. But so long as the prison couldn't be described, it remained out of view not just of the prisoners, but also of human rights groups, journalists and others who might have the power to intervene. At least it did, until Eyal Weizman and his team came along.

Weizman, 47, is a brusque-talking professor at the University of London, where he runs a research agency called Forensic Architecture. The agency's name refers to an insurance industry practice where architects inspect damaged buildings for flaws to determine fault. But Weizman and his team – a motley group of architects, scientists, coders, archaeologists, filmmakers and artists –

don't do insurance work. Rather, they try to make sense of drone strikes, shootings and other catastrophes, and identify the forces that brought them to bear.

To do this, Weizman's team takes standard architectural tools such as maps, telemetry and shadow clocks, and combines them with other information: witness testimony, crowdsourced photos and satellite imagery of crises taking place around the world. Forensic Architecture then draws on its various artistic skills to construct a model of a collapsed or damaged building, which the team can use to test out different theories about what happened.

"They are committed to using the tools of their trade as investigative tools," Weizman says of his crew. "We take our existing skillsets and repurpose them." These days, most of the evidence that comes out of a war zone comes in the form of a photo or video. When this happens, Weizman sets his image-based artists on the job. "There's something in the artist's gaze," he says. "A sensibility they have developed in other contexts that can be repurposed. They can look at two images, compose them together, and try to imagine what happened between the two captured points in time."

When the Omar Bin Abdul Aziz Hospital in Aleppo was destroyed by missile strikes attributed to the Syrian government in 2016, Weizman led a team that stitched together footage salvaged from CCTV and social media to build a 3D model of the site, overlaying wireframes that allowed them to trace the likely range and trajectory of the missile strikes. From there they were able to raise damning questions about Russia and Syria's claims of restraint against civilian targets in the ongoing civil war.

For the Saydnaya prison project, a collaboration with Amnesty International, the available data was much more limited. As Weizman puts it, "the only people who knew about it were the survivors or the perpetrators." By combining the 'earwitness testimonies' of survivors – what they heard on the inside, or how they recalled the echo of certain sounds – a team led by sound artist Lawrence Abu Hamdan was able to extract real architectural data about the complex. From there, they were able to build a harrowing 3D map of life behind the prison's thick concrete walls, piecing together the building's long corridors, cells and torture chambers.

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The main purpose of the Saydnaya project was to get human rights groups into the prison, to monitor it for abuses. If enough countries saw the model, the thinking went, pressure on the Assad regime could reach a tipping point. But the project ended up having more personal uses. For the survivors of Saydnaya, reliving the violence of their experience was not a straightforward process, and many found they were unable to recall basic details about the building's layout. "Memory is a spatial process," Weizman explains. "And sometimes traumatic memories are not easily accessed." Interestingly, Weizman found that as they slowly pieced together a working floor plan of the prison, more information started to surface, and repressed memories came flooding back. It became a circular process. "We built the architecture from the memory, and we built the memory from the architecture."

Weizman claims that the act of remembering helped liberate the volunteers from the burden of holding on to what little they knew. "We helped them to leave the prison behind," he says. "Of course, we had to acknowledge all the difficulties in accessing traumatic memory – we're not interrogators, we were there at their service, and they could have stopped it at any moment. But they say that now the building is out there on a website, they can take it out of their heads. They don't need to keep its memory."

Weizman, who is Israeli, didn't start out in architecture with the intent of undertaking global human rights investigations. But the highly conceptual education he received as a young man studying in London helped him to see architecture as a political system more than simply a mode of design. One of his first projects was an attempt to accurately map the West Bank – a fraught process, given its entanglement with an Israel that doesn't just surround it with clearly defined borders and walls, but weaves in and out of it both physically and politically. Needless to say, the project did not make him particularly popular in his home country. "The level of physical, architectural, and spatial entanglement across space and time [in places like Israel] is just insane," he says. "As an architect, I wanted to see what we could gain by looking at the world's intractable conflicts in the same way we might analyse a building, with different layers, corridors, barriers and infrastructural systems."

To construct his models, Weizman draws on the same data sources that an urban planner might use – street maps, or census numbers to determine facts about the population. But he is quick to point out that these 'official' sources have their limits, especially when it comes to conflict zones. Previously, information from bombsites in places like Gaza, or from police shootings in the U.S., came only from the state. Now, with the rise of social media and mobile phone cameras, every angle of a battle zone can be captured and broadcast to the world. Then there are bullet and bomb holes, which leave clues in the very architecture itself.

But an abundance of data isn't a simple thing to deal with. As Weizman puts it, "the paradox of human rights monitoring is not that there is too *little* information, but too much of it". One of Forensic Architecture's greatest challenges is simply making sense of the noise. "In the early years of social media, we thought the existence of images was enough," Weizman says. "But very rarely is there a trophy image that captures both perpetrator and victim in a single frame. You have thousands of people capturing photos just a minute before or after an event, or just

to the left, or just to the right. You need to investigate, and compose these images in [a virtual] space," he says, "so you can navigate them [as you would on the ground] rather than cut between images."

To illustrate his process, Weizman describes an investigation he conducted on the mass kidnapping of 43 students in Iguala, Mexico in 2014, where a sophisticated visualisation tool called PATTRN was used to correlate telephone call registers with gunshots and car movements. The model they ended up with told a clear story of synchronised attacks, and signs of collusion between police, organised crime and the military that weren't immediately apparent from any single data source.

"It's like a digital version of a yarn board," he explains, "where you connect the dots not between 30 data points, but 30,000. Obviously, that can't be done by hand. If you only look at the incident by itself, it could always be argued as the work of a bad apple or a rogue operator, but when you show the repetitions in time and space of a particular violation, you can take the level of responsibility upwards to the political level."

Weizman accepts that examining the forensics of particular incidents isn't simply about righting a wrong. You can't reverse time. The bomb has already gone off. The building has already collapsed. The prisoner has already been tortured. But denial of the past enables the violence of the future. The work Weizman and his team do is not just about working out who did what to whom. The bigger goal is to provide tools to bring about longer-term change, to stop crises before they begin.

"You need to be working towards goals that are much further ahead," he says. "In a situation where the mechanisms of justice are fully in operation, there's no need for our work, because there are police, and courts. But we work in that frontier zone where there is no law, and evidence is only as good as the political process that it is woven into." The next step, Weizman says, is to work with activists and civil society groups on the ground to effect change. "It's not enough to expose something with architectural models; you need to have the right social and political environment to support the claims you're making, and to do something with the evidence. Otherwise it's just a point in the dark." •