

Are you a model?

On an Architectural Medium of Spatial Exploration

Are you a model? A questionable start to a conversation one might think, and yet, architecture does beg the question. What does it mean to call something a model? Which implications, projections or desires are called to the table? Architects do not build buildings, they draw plans, they model structures or produce objects; all practices with a longstanding tradition in architecture—be they analog or digital. As discipline working with substitute media and through displaced methods, we might ask of objects indeed: Are you a model? More than a pickup line, we want to put the model front and center in an assessment of architectural thinking and doing.

In a time of shifting paradigms and increasing digitalization in architecture, a new generation of virtual models promises precision, predictability and easy communication between disciplines and protagonists. Yet rather than placing the model in categories lodged on either side of dichotomies such as analogue vs digital or representational vs conceptual, we want to investigate the role of the model precisely on and between such dividing lines—there is a renewed urgency to discuss this when much hope (and investment) is placed in seemingly perfect simulation models, be it economic, meteorological or medical.

Architectural models play a precise role in societal processes of making and knowing: they are referents not merely of scale or form, but of architectural knowledge—knowledge that is bound to systems of organization and order. Given the entanglements of organization and representation in histories of architecture, the model is a cultural and communication medium that warrants another look. At this conference, we will ask questions of the model as a tool to create knowledge—not just represent or conserve it—by investigating the modes of production and reproduction of models through digital means, their aesthetic and functional intention and social reception, their physical attributes and sensorial effects, and their role in the historical and critical discourse of architecture.

By organizing this international conference, we want to forge a discourse across disciplinary categories and local contexts to create intense exchange across a variety of institutions (museums, universities and practices), and different levels of academic careers (with early career researchers and established senior scholars). In eight moderated sessions with three presentations (one invited presentation, two through an international Call for Papers) over the course of three days, we will investigate together what an architectural model is, how it operated and operates, and which kinds of knowledge it produced and produces. Hence we ask for submissions which look at the architectural model as key lens to investigate architecture's production and simulations behind the scenes, into ideological and canonical gaps and breaks, and into technological questions aside from rhetorics of progress.

Investigating models for physical and societal spaces critically means to look at the history of implicit and explicit parameters—and those omitted—set by actors in charge. The approach of our project is necessarily

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intersectional, in that we pose the question of architecture models as inseparable from the realities they simulate or the conditions in which they are produced. In recent years, research in many disciplines has increasingly reflected the need for a large-scale, rigorous re-assessment of the entanglements, communities of interest and conflicting futures in modeling and simulating processes as well as their receptions.

The organizers are structurally and methodologically invested in an open-access event. Hence, the focus of the conference lies not only thematically on who models the spaces for (past and future) societies, but how to expand conventions through the inclusion of diverse perspectives. To support such a diverse set of contributions and participation, the organizers will provide simultaneous translation services as well as childcare support. A hybrid participation model will be put in place for those who cannot participate in person for visa, medical, care obligations or other reasons.

Sections and Topics

In several sessions over two and a half days we will investigate the questions raised above. One scholar for each panel has been invited to give an impulse lecture, and we will fill two further slots via this international Call for Papers. By calling upon scholars across the academic ranks, fields, geographies and backgrounds, we hope to uncover new approaches and diverse takes on the model as both instrument and phenomenon in architecture and its history.

Does size matter? Session 1 – On Models and Scale

This session investigates questions of scale and size in the architectural model. We might ask: How are shifts in media related to impacts on the notion of scale? What distinguishes a model of a facade from a mockup? How do dynamic scales reside in a software that is set by default at 1:1?

The question of scale is built into the story of architecture models. How large, how detailed, or how long-lived a model is defines not only its appearance, but its role in the process. By investigating relationships between size, material, temporality of different models we will try to uncover assumptions about models as miniatures or stand-ins, and try to discuss how scale matters (if it does).

What the hell happened to me? Session 2 – On their Afterlife and Decay

What keeps the model a model—and who cares for them when their time on the stage has passed? How can models be archived and helped into another life, be it retro-digitized or exhibited, restored or destroyed? What makes us keep some and toss others in the first place—and how do these choices affect the histories we build?

When the dust settles, models enter their afterlife: after they are built they reside on shelves in offices, stuffed in basements, behind glass or on hard drives in archives and museums. Some survive by accident but lose the context of their making, others take on a new role as (material or digital) spoliars. Others, like model parks or cities, might become ruins or survive outside the controlled spaces of archives. The resilience of glue and paper versus the upkeep of a digital model will be discussed here as much as the attempt to preserve not just material constructs or geometric shapes, but sensorial and spatial insights of models past.

Am I the real thing? Session 3 – On Copies and Casts

What is the notion of an “original” in relation to a model? What is the original, when a model outlives its referent? When several copies are cast from the same mold, do they constitute several originals due to their material and temporal specificities? If the model is no longer the rendition of something more “real”, what does it embody or document as one referent among many in the architectural process? How does the idea of a copy shift in 3D modelling software in relation to scrappy working models built from cardboard and glue?

In times of NFTs, where the subject of originality is redefined in relation to digital or digitised models, we want to look at the blurred dividing lines between a copy, a cast and their so-called “originals”. When a building is built after a surviving model as only evidence, or a model is cast from a building only rendered through a facade drawing or a photograph, “copying” becomes a transformative act, reframing the model’s categorical role as mere referent.

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Who made me? Session 4 – On their Material Production

When we look at models, do we see those who made the models or those they were made for? What decisions were taken, which materials chosen, what institutional or technological processes followed—and can we discover traces of the paths not taken? What lies behind the resulting construct, and what exactly holds it together beyond glue or vectorized parameters?

Exploring the space between a model's production and its reception, the story of its becoming remains often obscure; similarly, its material logic, the nuts and bolts and undersides remain craftfully out of sight. Whether built in large model workshops within architecture offices or through external contractors, by skilled experts or laypeople, we want to assess the conditions under which models are produced, be it as video game, competition entry, or 1:1 mock-up by investigating the process of model making, its tools and its actors.

Do we look alike? Focus Session 5 by FID Bau – On Digital Multiples Twins and Simulation Processes

In architecture, models - whether physical or virtual - assume the role of a manipulable „twin“. They allow us to experimentally test real requirements and conditions. They are woven into dynamic interrelationships between the physical - real - and the modeled - digital - which raise the question of what exactly happens when, for example, a digital model experiences the materialization of its data, or vice versa: when a physical model, or even the built architecture, is transferred back into a digitized proxy?

With these questions, the session focuses on heterogeneous models—within the paradigm of integrative design and digital process chains—that simulate not only the design of the building itself, but also its environment, its carbon footprint, and its robotic assembly line. Physical models and model-based prototypes accompany feedback-based architectural development cycles that seek innovative solutions for resource-efficient building in the future. In this way, they continue a tradition of Frei Otto's experimental model focused on form and design optimization, whose role as a research object between digital and analog will concern the session.

What can you learn from me? Session 6 – On Model Didactics

How do models teach us - and do they? Does the didactic content of a model in a teaching collection lie in its handling, its use or its making? How is the production and consolidation of knowledge in the fields of architecture, science, history and theology - to name just a few examples - continuously embodied and reshaped through the model? And does it have a will of its own in a certain sense?

Looking at architectural models that were produced to prove or provoke ideas or define canons, this session asks questions about the material production of knowledge through models and analyzes the implied values and projections that models were (and still are) asked to transport. Be it a training model in digital space, the plaster casts of famous classic forms or the archaeological reconstruction of the Temple of Solomon, models inform and mold what makes (and breaks) "architecture" as a discipline.

Give me access! Session 7 – On Models in Participatory Processes

Models seem to promise easier access for non-experts than highly codified media such as construction drawings; it is also taken to not pre-set the point of view from which it is being seen. It may seem as if models are inherently participatory objects—a simulation toward a more inclusive future, be it through city models of new infrastructure or technological measures such as endoscopes to look at architecture from a pedestrian's point of view; all at the same time when processes were developed to allow for other ways of participation of non-experts, alternative points of view or models open to interpretation. But the question of models allowing for the navigation of unknown terrain has more (and more sinister) implications: military training areas or a 1:1 replica of Bin Laden's home to practice its take-over; money heists are tested on models of federal reserve buildings.

How can we model democratic processes for "model-citizens"? How can models as proxies offer access to inaccessible places and spaces? How do they render things formerly reserved for experts visible to the larger public? And what are the politics behind the access (and who gets it)?

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What is my act? Session 8 – On Models as Actors and Stages

This session approaches models through tropes of the theater, such as stage/staging, plot/narrative, or actress/performance. Taking the performative potential of models literally, it asks for the realities models produce and the ways these realities are enacted by architects, clients, and the general public.

Understood as stages or stage sets, models create both actual and potential realities. This may be most obvious for 1:1 walk-in scenarios that create a 'real' sensual and bodily experience while projecting environments yet to be. Asking for the plots or stories models tell to pursue, convince, or to question, the same applies to models in any scale or material form. In a more figurative sense, all kinds of models can become stages for architects presenting their ideas in carefully scripted performances.

Contributions to this session address the model's role in performed processes of meaning-making, asking questions such as: What are the audiences models address and who in turn is ignored? How do models stage and project possible futures? How do architects/clients/members of the public perform and interact with models?

List of Invited Speakers

Daniel Cardoso Llach, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh
Thomas Demand, Berlin
Gabriele Gramelsberger, Universität Hamburg
Carolin Höfler, Köln International School of Design
Evangelos Kotsioris, Museum of Modern Art New York
Simona Valeriani, V&A Museum London
Matthew Wells, University of Manchester
Annabel Wharton, Duke University
Kelly Joan Whitmer, The University of the South, Sewanee TN
Liam Young, SCI-Arch Los Angeles
Maxime Zaugg, ETH Zürich

Logistics and General Information

A publication will condense and present the conference's findings. Rather than conventional "proceedings" we will produce a series of short-format essays (ca. 1500 words/ 6000 characters) focussing on one representation image. By asking contributors for a draft ahead of the conference and the edited submission shortly after the conference will ensure timely publication as well as allow for the implementation of the discourse developed at the conference between its participants.

The conference language will be English. Presentations are to be made in person, unless urgent circumstances prevent participation. Should you need childcare during the conference, please get in touch. We plan to pay (or at least subsidize) travel and lodging for all those contributors who do not have institutional funding available.

Frankfurt airport is connected to Darmstadt directly by bus or train (ca. 30 minutes).

Timeline and Dates

Submission of Abstracts: April 15, 2022

Send Abstracts (250 words max.) and a 1-page CV to model@architektur.tu-darmstadt.de with indication of the session that might best fit the topic (depending on submissions we might adjust the sessions accordingly or add one, for example).

Notification of Participants: End of May, 2022

We will notify all submissions by the end of May or early June with details regarding funding, session structures and lodging.

Submission of Paperdrafts and Images: October 1, 2022

All contributors are asked to submit a concise, focused draft of their presentation (1200-1500 words) analyzing or addressing 1 image. These submissions are meant to illustrate the argumentative thrust of the presentation and engage the question of the respective session.

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Conference: November 2 – 4, 2022

We will all convene in Darmstadt for the 3 day conference! (If circumstances will not allow it, the conference will be held online.)

Submission of final Short Papers and Image (incl. permissions): Early January 2023

The final version of the short papers (1500 words, one high-resolution image with cleared copyright permission for Open Access online and print publication) will be submitted January 2023.

About the Organizers

The Chair for Architecture Theory and Science at the Department of Architecture at TU Darmstadt (ATW, <https://www.architektur.tu-darmstadt.de/atw>) organizes the conference jointly with the Deutsches Architekturmuseum in Frankfurt am Main (DAM, <https://dam-online.de>), the LOEWE cluster of excellence “Architectures of Order” (<https://www.architecturesoforder.org>) and the DFG-funded FID BAUdigital (<https://www.fid-bau.de/#baudigital>). The TU and the DAM are both part of the CCSA (Center for Critical Studies in Architecture) (<https://criticalarchitecture.org/>), a research cluster of the Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main (Art History Department), the Technische Universität Darmstadt (Architecture Department) and the Deutsches Architekturmuseum that is dedicated to a critical perspective on theory and history of architecture and, importantly here, its mediality.

Architecture Theory and Science (ATW), TU Darmstadt

Anna-Maria Meister (Session 1)
Lisa Beißwanger (Session 8)
Christiane Fülcher (Session 3)
Anna Luise Schubert (Session 4)

Deutsches Architekturmuseum (DAM)

Oliver Elser (Session 7)

LOEWE Excellence Cluster “Architectures of Order”

Christina Clausen (Session 6)
Chris Dähne (Session 5)

FID BAUdigital

Chris Dähne (Session 5)
Andreas Noback (Session 5)

Independent Curator

Teresa Fankhänel, Chicago (Session 2)

Contact

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