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**Trace: Design Project and Critical Reflection**

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Title:

ARCA (Archive for Rural Contemporary Architecture):<sup>1</sup> Translating Bankside air-raid shelter through material and spatial tracings

Abstract:

This project explores spaces of tolerance by using the University as a place for casting concrete architectural models and setting them into dialogue with faculty members.<sup>2</sup> The project's site of study was the underground air-raid shelter built during World War 2, in the garden of the Hopton Street Almshouses, in London's Bankside district. Bankside is in the Borough of Southwark, located on the southern bank of the Thames. It runs just west of Blackfriar's Bridge to St Mary Overie Dock in the east. In recent decades Bankside has been subject to regeneration, most notably the conversion of the former Power Station into Tate Modern Art Gallery, which has turned Bankside into a global tourist destination. In the accelerated process of development, the underground presence of the air-raid shelter has been tolerated, but become somewhat lost.

Keywords:

Bankside air-raid shelter, Archive for Rural Contemporary Architecture, Design Proposal

Insert Figure 1

Insert Figure 2

Text:

Working with the University of Westminster's Fabrication Laboratory,<sup>3</sup> ARCA began their project by setting up a process for casting a model of the interior spaces of the air-raid shelter. Once the process of casting was underway, ARCA invited one faculty member to act as provocateur, tasked with asking a question and a second faculty member tasked with responding.<sup>4</sup> ARCA took the role of project-leader and, ultimately, the responsibility for formulating a design proposal for the study site. Even if, in reality, the boundaries between the roles tended to blur, by making them explicit, as structural parameters of the research, they served as a critical framework to return to, whenever the project seemed to be losing momentum.<sup>5</sup>

Insert Figure 3

Insert Figure 4

## Provocation

When asked why they were casting a model of the Bankside air-raid shelter ARCA said it was because they wanted to draw attention to the lost history of the area. Linking the historic origins of the shelter - it was built during World War 2 - with the notion of casting brought to mind a piece by the artist Rachel Whiteread called *Untitled (Room 101)*. It was cast in 2003 and displayed for almost a year in the Italian Cast Court at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Just like the Bankside air-raid shelter, 'Untitled (Room 101)' has wartime connotations. One connotation is literary, the other real. On the one hand the piece refers to the torture chamber in George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, on the other hand it refers to the actual room from which the piece was cast. Whiteread cast Room 101 at the headquarters of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in Portland Place in Central London.<sup>6</sup> Supposedly it was the location of George Orwell's office when he worked for the Eastern Service during the Second World War. ARCA's proposed title for their model, they called it *Trace*, seemed to reinforce the connection to Whiteread. But as casting progressed, reading it through Whiteread's Room 101 became increasingly less convincing. Whiteread's cast is one-to-one, her mode of working captured the traces of lived reality that had become ingrained and embedded on the surfaces and in the spaces of the actual room. ARCA did not cast at one-to-one, their strategy for casting relied on techniques of representation adopted from the practices of architectural designers. ARCA's casting strategy did not relate to the surfaces and spaces of the air-raid shelter in quite the same way as Whiteread's casting related to the surfaces and spaces of room 101. Thus the open question of what it was that *Trace* traced became a truly beguiling feature of the work.

The architectural historian and critic Anthony Vidler was the first to make the link between Whiteread's mode of casting and architectural model-making. In his book *Warped Space: Architecture and Anxiety in Modern Culture*, first published in 2000, Vidler associated Whiteread's casting with the plaster models of the Italian Modernist architect Luigi Moretti.<sup>7</sup> Vidler recounted how, in the early 1950s, Moretti had wanted 'to illustrate what he saw as the history of different spatial types in architecture.'<sup>8</sup> As Vidler explained, in order to do so Moretti made architectural models through a process of casting as solids what were in reality 'spatial voids.'<sup>9</sup> The effect of the models was to make the spaces they revealed seem 'dense and impenetrable.'<sup>10</sup> Moretti's manner of working, as described by Vidler, seemed to have a great deal in common with the way ARCA went about their casting of the Bankside air-raid shelter. Moretti derived his way of working from the architectural tradition of the formal model, one important function of which is to describe space in terms of formal relationships. Once a space is described formally, then it can be cast, or built, using real materials, plaster

for example. Whiteread's process for casting Room 101 worked in a different way, certainly it did not involve the architect's formal level of abstraction. With Room 101 Whiteread had cast directly into the actual surfaces and spaces of the subject space. The relationship between the subject space and the cast was not unlike the way a footprint or tyre track is recorded in the damp earth, in mud or in sand.

ARCA's work process involved three main levels of abstraction: first they surveyed the subject space, second they built a digital model based on the survey and, finally, they reproduced the digital model by casting it in concrete, whereby it appears as an object both haptic and optic, awaiting installation.

Insert Figure 5

### **Response**

And yet ARCA's casting was not like Moretti's because ARCA were not interested in revealing the form of the underground shelter as a spatial type. ARCA wanted to reveal a lost history, let's call it a memory, of Bankside, as it used to be, before the accelerated development that turned it from a locality into a venue and hub for the world wide circulation of contemporary culture and art.<sup>11</sup>

ARCA actually cast two models, not just one. The first was cast in black-pigmented concrete, in some sense the black responding to the darkness of the underground spaces and the materiality of the excavated soil. Cast at a scale of 1:50, the model represents the full extent of the labyrinth of underground chambers. The second model, in grey concrete, at the larger scale of 1:20, reproduces the texture of the walls and ceilings of the chambers. The walls and ceilings had been formed out of a uniform concrete plank, replicated and laid vertically for the walls, horizontally for the ceiling and floors, an adaptation of dry dock construction. The system is simple and ingenious. The planks are evenly ribbed to form a 'U' shaped profile that can be off-set and interlocked, rather like a zip. This technique of assemblage is how the walls, ceilings and floors were set out and made to fit together on site.

Moretti's casts were of culturally valued works of architecture. For example, he modelled Hadrian's Villa, the Baroque churches of Borromini and Guarini, sequences of rooms in the Ducal Palace at Urbino.

Insert Figure 6

Today these places have been absorbed into the same kind of cultural circuits that are facilitated and promoted by institutions like Tate Modern in London. ARCA on the other hand, cast a simple utilitarian structure with no architectural value, one whose primary interest for them lay in the fact it was below ground, thus invisible and, perhaps for that reason, had been tolerated by the accelerated development above.

Insert Figure 7

Insert Figure 8

### **Proposal**

Reflecting upon their two cast models, upon the faculty members' provocation and response, ARCA would like to bring their project to a close by proposing a third model, one that works at the scale of one-to-one. The third model is intended to draw attention to the low-lying, below-ground status of the air-raid shelter, it will operate in opposition to the predominantly high-rise, engulfing development above. The third model will materialise as a system of thick-set vertical stakes, rising out of the ground directly above the underground shelter below. The third model treats the ground surface as if it were a reflective plane, with the thick-set stakes planted on top. The stakes rise up, to mirror above, the depth of the shelter below. The tops of the stakes will form a hovering horizontal plane, the figure of the horizontal plane mirroring the plan form of the shelter below, tracing it out above ground and thereby revealing the tolerated space that lies below.

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Figure 5 Interior detail of 1:20 model. Photograph by Corinna Dean.

Figure 6 Moretti's representations of the sequence of volumes, Palazzo Ducale di Urbino, Spazio 1952

Figure 7 Bankside Air-Raid Shelter: underground and above ground. Photograph by Corinna Dean.

Figure 8 Air-Raid Shelter Cast Model 1:50. Photograph by Corinna Dean.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.arca-projects.com](http://www.arca-projects.com)

<sup>2</sup> ARCA worked with the University of Westminster

<sup>3</sup> [fabricationlab.london/](http://fabricationlab.london/)

<sup>4</sup> Provocateur and correspondent were selected from the Department of Architecture, they have asked to remain anonymous.

<sup>5</sup> The project can already claim to have 'impact value' because the casts were shown in a commercial gallery during the 2017 London Festival of Architecture. To suit the gallery context they had to be presented in terms acceptable to the gallery owner, which meant a great deal of the project's critical content was not shown. Through Spaces of Tolerance ARCA have had the opportunity to revisit the project and to present it in full, bringing casting, provocation, response and proposal together into a single text.

<sup>6</sup> Broadcasting House, Portland Place, London W1A 1AA

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<sup>7</sup> Moretti's models were published in the magazine Spazio, edited by himself, see especially, no. 7, 9-20. December 1952/April 1953

<sup>8</sup> Anthony Vidler, *Architecture and Anxiety in Modern Culture*, (Cambridge, MA:MIT Press, 2000), 145

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>11</sup> In this respect it is interesting that Herzog and de Meuron's winning image in their competition entry showed the Turbine Hall with curated art pieces situated in the space, one of which was by Whiteread - TG 12/4/7/7/2 Tate Gallery archives