
Ilona Gaynor and Benedict Singleton, founding partners of design and research studio The Department of No, look beyond the specific technological possibilities of acute accuracy and explore the principle of zero tolerance as an aesthetic of precision. How is such an aesthetic at work when an architectural strategy places a heightened emphasis on the exact placement of objects in space and time? Could the precision in which a single spatial intervention is pursued have more fundamental and far-reaching consequences than we ever imagined?

*Ilona Gaynor and
Benedict Singleton*

WHAT WE WANT IS IN THAT ROOM

As architects know well, there is a certain pleasure to be found in a thing well made. This pleasure is so simple, it seems, that it does not warrant further investigation. Architects find little point in discussing the obvious fact that, without a certain minimum degree of precision, a building does not stand up. Likewise, that one can be pleased to come across a structure that holds together apparently against the odds – the work of a designer that has brought ingenuity and finesse to their craft – seems too basic, too obvious, to draw comment. But it is a pleasure about which there is more to say.

The Department of No's interest in this very particular kind of pleasure is piqued by the tranche of newly developed technologies to which this issue of Δ is dedicated. These technologies comprise systems for scanning environments and modelling the processes within them, to historically unprecedented

Ilona Gaynor, *Everything Ends in Chaos*, 2011
Film still: the board members in deliberation while a bomb hangs above their heads.



levels of detail. Of course, such systems, and the increasingly acute spatial interventions they permit, find a wide range of applications. They offer new resources to, say, those interested in the optimisation of wing surfaces, rifle bores or chip architectures. They unlock new constructive possibilities through novel material arrangements at the nano scale; the extraordinary conductive, optical and mechanical properties of a one-atom-thick graphene lattice is one example.¹ And they help to construct strikingly new spatial situations. Consider, for example, the military contractor VAWD Engineering's 'life form detection' system, which exploits new radar technologies to 'see through' architectural obstructions and identify, by their heartbeats, the human targets they conceal.²

The purpose of this essay is not to prospect the architectural potential of one, or a group of, these technologies. Its interests lie elsewhere. If these technologies implicitly posit a principle of zero tolerance as a horizon architecture can approach, it invites an exploration of this principle as such – an aesthetic of precision as a quality of design in general, not the precision afforded by a given system or technology. The following discusses how this aesthetic is at work when architectural stratagems are given force through exact placement and timely action. In these situations, the precision with which a single spatial intervention is made can turn a world on its head, creating, undoing or transforming the whole.

The Aesthetic of Precision

An aesthetic of precision connects architecture with other fields, and can offer a point of transit between them. If architecture hones an appreciation for the arrangement of material in space and over time, this appreciation can extend to forms other than those taken by buildings. Within the very same register – highly materialist, mechanical, geometric – one can appreciate the deft hands of the pickpocket or a surgeon as much as those of the architect.³ Indeed, architects perhaps have more to learn than to teach in this regard – in the first instance from film, where the use of detail to mobilise a plot is a staple device.

Among many possible examples, David Fincher's *Panic Room* (2002) stands out for its rigour. The film's minimalist premise is that three men break into a Manhattan townhouse, believing it unoccupied. A mother (Jodie Foster) and daughter (Kristen Stewart), who moved in that day, take refuge in the fortified panic room of the film's title, not knowing the intruders are after a fortune in bearer bonds in a concealed safe within their haven. The film documents the increasingly desperate measures taken by the invaders to get into the room, and by its occupants to get out. The structural geometry of the house goes beyond *mise-en-scène* and becomes a protagonist in its own right; the phrase that titles this essay, 'What we want is in that room', is written on card and held up to a closed-circuit camera in one of many moments in which highlights and textural details become integrated into the

plot, as a set of coordinates and portals that locate, differentiate and connect the house's rooms. The drama hinges on plug sockets, phone lines, ventilation shafts, wall cavities and other domestic infrastructure, which become vital components in the siege as means of entrance and exit. The camera moves unimpeded through the house's architecture, smoothly passing through walls and doors, following the lines of pipes and telephone cables, rendering the action in slow, perfectly linear pan shots that focus on the details of space, material and surface as pivots in the plot.

Everything Ends in Chaos

Panic Room is predicated on the ideas that spatial precision grants access to environments previously off limits, and that apparently incidental details and subtle interventions can produce outside effects. These ideas are key to an expanded architectural aesthetics of precision. *Everything Ends in Chaos* (2011) investigates these ideas through very different means.⁴ It reverse-engineers a fictive global financial catastrophe, tracing the intricate trajectories of people and things implicated in the unfolding disaster, in ways that are cinematic, but that narrative film disallows. It began as an attempt to design a 'black swan', a term popularised in Nassim Nicholas Taleb's book of the same name, in which it stands for an unpredicted event that makes a massive impact.⁵ The image itself is an older philosophical saw,

Scenario map and artefacts. A chronological index detailing the twists and turns of events.



Ilona Gaynor, *Under Black Carpets*, 2012–
Scale models: bystanders, witnesses, police,
women and children, and hostages.





relating to the encounter with black swans by the first Europeans to reach southern Australia. Before then, every swan they had ever seen was white; but the generalisation 'swans are white' was wrong, despite all the evidence hitherto.

The project's plot begins with the kidnapping of the wealthy wife of a senator, Mrs Henderson, which sets in motion a series of events that accumulate to create a global economic disaster. Working with bankers, brokers, loss adjustors and risk strategists through the course of the project, the scenarios depicted were passed through actual actuarial assessment as to their probabilities and financial implications. The project investigates the points at which economic and architectural fact collide with speculative fiction – those of actuaries assessing future probabilities as much as those of designers; and explores, too, the various modes of precision that are at work, from insurers' assessments of the value of individual body parts in the case of their loss or destruction, to the specific location of people and devices in a series of environments that allow the catastrophe to emerge.

This plot is communicated through a collection of objects, diagrams and narrative texts to articulate the course of events. Its final scenes – among them a flight of doves that have been fed Mrs Henderson's diamonds escaping forever through a limo sunroof, and a golden commemorative missile exploding in a boardroom – are presented through film. The

connection between the spectacular image on film and the technical infrastructure that produces it is not incidental. Technologies of cinematic production provide a critical reference point for this architectural aesthetic. Precision does not only obtain a well-rendered final product, but also encompasses the devices that go into creating it; that is, the systems that allow precision to be achieved – strategies and techniques of modelling events, imaginative rehearsal, the speculative entertainment of multiple possibilities. Film production, and its contracts, meetings, scale models, test footage, shot lists, schematics, maps and timelines, is an art of coordinating the objects and processes that must come together with precision to yield a single image.

Under Black Carpets

These devices share a striking similarity with those used in another field where an aesthetic of precision is paramount: forensics. Many contemporary technologies lend themselves to the deconstruction of events into a probabilistic topography of actions, one that can be deployed before a jury to argue fact and intent: found footage, microscopy, ballistics diagrams, DNA swabs, 3D laser scans, satellite imaging and more. These technologies lend to forensics not only a portfolio of diagnostic means, but also a substantial aesthetic force.⁶ In the courtroom, exactness translates into plausibility, which in turn is the currency of persuasion. Which is to say that, no matter what the facts of the case,

precision produces legal agency through the suspension of disbelief.

Under Black Carpets (2012–) is an investigation into the relationship between architecture and law, crime and forensics.⁷ It presents a fictional event – the simultaneous robbery of five different banks in the area around One Wilshire in downtown Los Angeles – through a set of objects to be used in court. In this case, the objects, from alibi reconstructions to trajectory diagrams, are 'evidence' that is not recovered from the scene, but created for the express purpose of activating a conclusive legal discussion. As such, they do not seek to produce a definitive map of the events that occurred, but something that looks beyond reasonable doubt, estimating probabilities and plugging gaps. Precision serves both sides here: the intricate techniques used in the robberies to gain access to vaults and make good on the getaway, and the authority's efforts to produce a retrospective picture of events that is persuasive enough for a sentence to be passed, even if it is false.

The Physics of Power

As in Everything Ends in Chaos, there is no straightforwardly moral directive to Under Black Carpets. They are projects that attend to 'a physics, not a theology, of power'.⁸ They do not aspire to conjure images of some kind of utopia in the hope of inciting architecture towards it, or for that matter posit a dystopia to be evaded. Instead, they

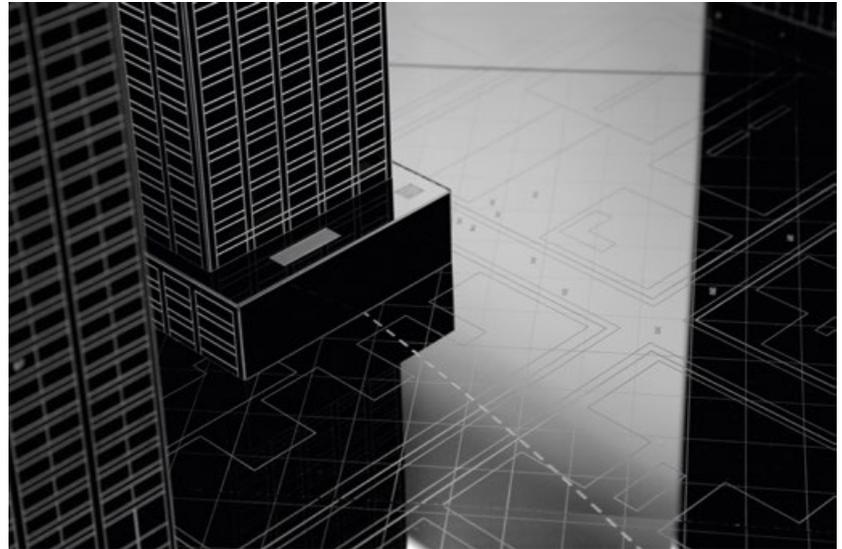
Ilona Gaynor, Under Black Carpets, 2012–

Model artefact: an American Airlines A300 domestic carrier plane is dropped onto One Wilshire to serve as a chaotic distraction.



pursue an examination of the mechanisms of risk assessment, financial calculation, and rather more literal, legal forms of judgement – abstract systems that undergird societal structures and are powerful forces of architectural production in themselves, generating new situations as fast as a handshake or as slow as a building. To explore them is to invoke an aesthetic of precision that foregrounds the risk of precise architectural action – what is gambled in narrowing margins of space and time, where exactness matters and becomes a force in its own right. The easy-going amorality that comes with appreciating a technical feat for itself becomes something different when intensified to this point, where visceral situations are coupled with the unflinching detachment that their complexity requires, and acumen – literally, sharpness – becomes the deciding vector. The principle of zero tolerance is unforgiving of error. ▢

Model detailing: markings highlighting the trajectory of the American Airlines A300 vessel as it hits One Wilshire.



They [the projects] do not aspire to conjure images of some kind of utopia in the hope of inciting architecture towards it, or for that matter posit a dystopia to be evaded.

Notes

1. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Graphene#Properties>.
2. <http://vawdengineering.com>.
3. See Robert Friedel, *A Culture of Improvement*, MIT Press (Cambridge, MA), 2010.
4. *Everything Ends in Chaos*, by Ilona Gaynor: see www.ilonagaynor.co.uk/Everything_Ends_In_Chaos.
5. Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan*, Penguin (London), 2001.
6. Eyal Weizman, *The Least of All Possible Evils*, Verso (London), 2012.
7. *Under Black Carpets*, by Ilona Gaynor: see www.ilonagaynor.co.uk/Under_Black_Carpets.
8. Grégoire Chamayou, *Manhunts: A Philosophical History*, Princeton University Press (Princeton, NJ), 2012.



Model detail of carrier hotel, One Wilshire, the building that serves as a target for distraction.