The Evidence Room

Frédéric Crahay

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THE EVIDENCE ROOM

→ Frédéric Crahay
Auschwitz Foundation

Between 28 May and 17 November 2016, the Venice Biennale in Italy hosted an installation called *The Evidence Room* by Robert Jan van Pelt, professor of architecture at the University of Waterloo School of Architecture (UWSA), Canada. The project visualizes an essential link between architecture and the Holocaust and, as such, fitted the overall theme of that year's Biennale curated by Alejandro Aravena: "Reporting from the Front".

The Evidence Room reconstructs key architectural elements of Auschwitz, more precisely the large crematoria and gas chambers in Birkenau, and is based on the report van Pelt wrote as an expert witness in the 2000 trial opposing the American scholar Deborah Lipstadt and the notorious Holocaust denier and historian David Irving. The latter sued Lipstadt for libel after she cited him as a revisionist and Hitler apologist in her 1994 book *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory*. The role of this trial in Holocaust historiography cannot be underestimated. Indeed, for the very first time, the negation of the Holocaust was publically rejected on a juridical basis. Lipstadt remembers this eventful time in *History on Trial: My Day in Court with a Holocaust Denier*. Her story was adapted for the screen by Mick Jackson in 2016 (*Denial*).

In order to counter Irving's negationist arguments in court, forensic evidence had to be produced, such as architectural remains and authentic blueprints. Van Pelt's report thus outlines a new field of research at the intersection of architecture, technology, history, law and human rights, and which is now known as "forensic architecture". He recounts his experience of the trial in *The Case for Auschwitz* (2002), which already features the rudimentary idea for *The Evidence Room* exhibition that would be further developed in 2016 by the professor himself and a team of students of the University of Waterloo. Donald McKay and Anne Bordeleau, both architects, and Sascha Hastings, an independent arts producer, joined the adventure.

Seventy years after the events, a concept that had existed only on paper now became a 3D reality – again. *The Evidence Room* reconstructs full-scale models of a gas column, a gas door and a wall section with a gas-tight hatch plus some eighty casts of photos, documents and blueprints that were presented as evidence in the Irving-Lipstadt trial. The exhibition received critical acclaim in professional architectural circles and was covered by the magazines *Azure*, *Canadian Architect* and *Dezeen*. By dedicating this issue's Portfolio to the project, *Testimony Between History and Memory* wishes to bring it to the attention of European scholars working on the Holocaust. ■

→ Learn more

◆ The curators published a book that accompanies the exhibition and explains the project in further detail: Robert Jan van Pelt, Donald McKay, Anne Bordeleau & Sascha Hastings, *The Evidence Room*, Toronto: The New Jewish Press, 2016, 176 p.

Building
The Evidence Room
part 1

Building
The Evidence Room
part 4

Interior perspective of *The Evidence Room*
with models of Auschwitz gas column
and gas-tight hatch, plaster casts and
model of gastight door

Building
The Evidence Room
part 2

Building
The Evidence Room
part 3

Model of Auschwitz
gas column in
The Evidence Room

Technical drawing
of a gas column

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Evidence Room	
Waterloo Architecture	
drawing	Exhibit Components
disegno	Gas Column
scale, scala	1 : 10
date, data	2015-11-24
number	EV-007A
numero	
Donald McKay	donalddmckay@gmail.com 1 416 458 9675

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Model of the victim side of gas-tight door in *The Evidence Room* ➤

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© Sothan Allman

➤ The hemispherical grid protecting the peephole on the inside of the model of a gas-tight door

Model of a gas-tight hatch and ladder in *The Evidence Room* ➤

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Architectural drawing of Krematorium IV and V type building from the Bauleitung

Cast of section of Krematorium III and drawings by David Olère from 1946