Signs, images and life
Researching the mimetical mode of architecture

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The paper gives a theoretical argument as to the specificity of architecture as a field that touches upon very different modes of signification or modalities of knowledge: scientific knowledge (signs), artistic inputs (images) and interactive processes (life). It will argue that these different aspects are inextricably entwined in any phenomenon of architecture that is studied in its full width and depth. Most research strategies in architecture legitimately focus on certain aspects – e.g. historical analysis, or technical investigations, or inquiries into design methodology. It is our intention, however, to reflect upon the possibility of an inclusive research strategy, which aims at coming to terms with the specificity of architecture. This means that we intend to develop a strategy that deals with architecture's different modalities of knowledge or modes of signification. Examples are given of themes and issues that have been studied following the proposed strategy.

Architecture – it has been known for quite some time – is neither a real science nor a real art. Architecture is not simply a theory nor can it be reduced to purely practical knowledge about how to build buildings. There exists a very long tradition of reflexivity and critique in architecture. The history of architectural writing is – from Vitruvius to Tzonis one could say – filled with claims of its scientific status. Nevertheless, this claim has never been accepted completely. Architecture has proven to be too slippery a thing to fit unproblematically within the rigid systems of science. And even within the humanities it is not quite clear where the study of architecture belongs.

The reason for architecture's resistance to categorization might be that the object of architecture, its 'essence' so to say, is not easily identifiable. One can indeed discuss endlessly the exact meaning of the word, whether, for example, we understand architecture to refer to the whole of the built environment or just to a very specific part of it that is informed by some reflexive theory. And even if it would be possible to agree on this topic, then the fact remains that the study of architecture requires an initiation in so many different fields and disciplines that the exact focus on an autonomous reality called 'architecture' anyhow beco-

mes blurred. Nevertheless there is much to say on behalf of the hypothesis that architecture constitutes a very rich semantic and scientific field, and that disciplinary thought and epistemological debate in science as well as in the humanities can gain enormously from a rigorous engagement with architecture, especially with the ways architecture manages to intertwine different modalities of knowledge or modes of signification.

As one argument in favor of this hypothesis, we want to refer to a book by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, on the Dialectics of Enlightenment. In a passage that is severely indebted to Walter Benjamin, Adorno and Horkheimer explain how during the course of history the character of language underwent radical change. Originally, they claim, sign and image formed a unity in language, as can be seen from Egyptian hieroglyphs in which signification is the result of the merging of abstract reference in a sign and imitation in an image. This original unity dissolved and both modes of signification, sign and image, developed separately. The sign became decisive for the development of language as denotation – in science and scholarship that is – whereas the realm of the image has been reduced to that of art and literature:

> For science the word is a sign: as sound, image, and word proper it is distributed among the different arts, and is not permitted to reconstitute itself by their addition, by synesthesia, or in the composition of the Gesamtkunstwerk. As a system of signs, language is required to resign itself to calculation in order to know nature, and must discard the claim to be like her. As image, it is required to resign itself to mirror-imagery in order to be nature entire, and must discard the claim to know her.[1]

Horkheimer and Adorno do see the divorce between sign and image as a disastrous development, because reason in the fullest meaning of the word cannot be reduced to pure calculation: in that case it degenerates into a purely instrumental rationality, with the irrational consequences that follow. The same goes for the image: when the image becomes pure depiction and is no longer governed by a rational impulse, it is also inadequate and cannot bring about any genuine knowledge of reality.

> The separation of sign and image is irremediable. Should unconscious self-satisfaction cause it once again to become hypostatized, then each of the two isolated principles tends toward the destruction of truth.[2]

Nevertheless, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, it is possible and necessary both in art and in philosophy to confront this fissure between sign and image, and to attempt to bridge the gap. Philosophy operates at a conceptual level, the level of the sign, whereas art works at the level of aesthetic appearances, that of the image. Inasmuch as art and philosophy both aspire to provide knowledge of truth however, they may not hypostatize their own form of knowledge as absolute: philosophy cannot only operate with concepts, while art is obliged to be something more than pure depiction, more than just a reproduction of what exists.

What Adorno and Horkheimer state here about the relationship between sign and image in philosophy and art, should be understood as instructive for the relationship between scientific thinking and architecture as well. Architecture is, more than any art, the place where an artistic input is controlled by all sorts of rationalities. At the same time it is a discipline where rationality alone can never completely explain the results of the design process, nor the way people actually use their buildings and relate to them, unless it denies the artistic and poetic dimensions involved. In fact, the process character of design and of the interaction between people and buildings create a relationship between sign and image in which another modality of knowledge (or mode of signification) is at stake – we can call this the modality of mimesis.

Mimesis is a term that is not yet active in Dialectic of Enlightenment, but that is given prominence in Adorno's later work, especially in his Aesthetic Theory.[3] In this book he refers to 'mimesis' as a kind of affinity between things and persons, which is not based on rational knowledge and which exceeds the mere antithesis between subject and object. According to Adorno, art characteristically endeavours to create a dialectical relation between both moments of cognition (or modalities of knowledge), 'mimesis' and 'ratio': a work of art comes into being not only on the basis of a mimetic impulse, but requires also a lot of rationality and

thought on behalf of the artist. Ratio and mimesis however, are in an antithetical and paradoxical relation to each other: the two moments of cognition cannot simply complement or be easily reconciled with each other.

What is important in this idea about mimesis can be addressed under two headings. First of all mimesis has to do with a process of translation, a process of mediation. Mimesis makes possible the very possibility of recognizing similarities and transferring meanings from one language to another. A feature of this process of translation that we call mimesis is that it is never completely transparent. There is always something happening, a shift appears, there is some gain or loss of meaning, something that is being twisted. Secondly, we can say that mimesis can fulfil a critical role. Adorno more specifically relates the critical character of art to its mimetic aspect. Adorno is convinced that works of art on the basis of a combination of ratio and mimesis yield a kind of knowledge of reality, and that this knowledge is critical by nature: art, by its mimetic relation to reality, highlights something about the nature of that reality, thus criticizing it at the same time. Rather than illuminate the beautiful, the harmonious, the charming, art through mimesis will reveal what is repressed, dissonant, chaotic or inhuman. Art in this way visualizes the fragmented nature of our reality. In as much as the shifting that is the result of mimesis reveals something that hitherto had been repressed or concealed, it is a shifting that acts in a critical way towards an existing situation.

Returning to Horkheimer's and Adorno's diagnosis regarding sign and image in the Dialectic of Enlightenment, it is clear that they see both as reductions of the correlative capacities of rationality and mimesis: sign refers to an instrumental rationality that has lost its capacity of critique; image refers to an impoverished mode of mimesis, which is reduced to the most literal level of imitation. The concept of mimesis also includes a performative aspect: mimesis has to do with a process of translation, a transfer of meaning, in which something happens that is never completely transparent.

Three registers and three tracks

Reflecting upon this diagnosis of Horkheimer and Adorno, we developed a working hypothesis that generates a certain research strategy and that is at the same time tested by that strategy. The working hypothesis is that in order to understand architecture in its full width and depth, one doesn't need just two terms or registers, but rather three. The word register comprises here what earlier in the text has been called modalities of knowledge or modes of signification. If, in the terminology of Horkheimer and Adorno, sign stands for instrumental rationality, for systematic analysis, for calculation, for denotation and 'coding' – to adopt a semiological term; image stands for pure depiction, for reproduction of what exists, for representation without actual presence, for mirror imagery, both words imply a certain immobility, a frozen state, where concepts and meanings are fixed and do not change anymore. In order to grasp the possibility of change and transformation, one has to take into account a process term, referring to interactive practices that forge an ongoing process of signification that is mobile, shifting and generative. It is thanks to this third term that the other two can be brought in interaction with one another.

For lack of any better word, we provisionally use the word life as the third term or register: life refers here to vital forces which ensure that the bleak realities of sign and image are sometimes forced into a condition where they need to interact with one another, thus giving rise to new and critical meanings. If these forces are taken into account, the possibility emerges that, in the interplay of the three registers of sign, image and life, sign is no longer necessarily reduced to instrumental rationality, but lives up to its vocation of critical rationality, whereas image is no longer confined to the literal realm of mirror imagery, but becomes mimesis and can play out its critical intent too. The processes and practices we refer to have to do with the emergence of something new and unexpected, with formation, with performance (acting out), with coincidences, sometimes with a system of self-regulation. It seems to us that they are provoked by a condition of lack: if something is missing, if there is a semantic void, if there is a condition of displacement, if a strong desire awakes, the forces of life begin to claim prominence

because the normally prevailing modes of signification – signs and images – fall short.[4] In short, life (process, practice) fuelled by conditions of semantic void (displacement, desire) manages to bring sign and image into a dialectic tension whereby possibilities of critical ratio and critical mimesis originate.

In order to address the complexities that follow from architecture's involvement with these different modes of signification/modalities of knowledge, we have identified three tracks along which research can be organized each corresponding to different media of architectural expression or experience. (Not every research project necessarily comprises investigations along these three tracks and into these three media. The theoretical model we formulate here can support different actualisations of the model which can have a fairly different outlook when put into practice.)

One can indeed not simply subdivide architectural phenomena into their constitutive aspects of signs, images and life. A more subtle approach is needed, one in which different research tracks concentrate on different media that each comprise a different embodiment of the three modalities of sign, image and life. By differentiating between the media in which architectural knowledge plays out, one can work with the three tracks of 'built forms, texts and actions'. These three different media embody the register of signs, images and life in different doses, and can be studied according to different methodologies.

Built form refers to spatial constellations with a specific history and an underlying (morpho-typological) logic. This underlying logic tends to be more mimetic than rational: it is a logic that has to do with transformations, similarities and correspondences. It is based upon processes of analogy and metaphorical transposition. As such it relies more upon the register of images than upon those of signs or life. The preferred methods to study this medium are morpho-typological analysis, historical analysis, iconography, and the like. Of course built forms correspond also to the register of sign and rationality, in the sense that built forms have to do with facts and figures too, for example in their technical characteristics.

The second medium is that of texts. Built form usu-ally does not emerge out of the blue, but is immersed in the architectural and urban discourses that were imminent at the time of its conception. Studying the formal texts (prevalent theories and ongoing discussions) that concern a specific building or an urban neighbourhood, is therefore part of the second track in the research strategy. Here the analysis is usually focused on rational elements as they are spelled out in theoretical texts or argumentative discourses. The register of signs is often prominently present in this medium, whereas image and life tend to take second and third place (although it cannot be denied that rhetorical and metaphorical language can play also an important role in texts on architecture). Under the heading of texts we also study informal speech, as for instance when we interview inhabitants or users. In this informal speech life is very actively present, with all the inconsistencies it implies. Such a speech often has image-like qualities, whereas the purely rational level of signs takes on a less prominent role. Discourse analysis is the method that is mostly applied within this track.

The third track comprises the level of actions, which is the heading under which we assemble design and implementation processes but also different modes of social interaction with buildings and spaces. One can discern a formal level of action (as, for example, when a building is designed, realized or used in complete accordance with its official programme and requirements). In such a case, action is mostly based upon the register of signs, whereas life and images take on secondary roles. Sometimes, however, one can perceive another, more dynamic kind of action, which consists of a sort of 'bricolage' (Lévi-Strauss) whereby new concepts and solutions originate out of an unexpected interplay of available concepts and solutions or whereby improvisation of use leads to a reinterpretation of what is usable. This applies in those cases, for example, where buildings and spaces provoke uses and interactions which are not consistent with their official functions or intentions (e.g. when spontaneous demonstrations take place on streets normally forbidden for pedestrians). In such cases the mimetic register of the image is often at play, life taking on a secondary role and signs being of minor importance.

The analytical skills required to work on this track are not always obvious. Sometimes it requires the input of fieldwork skills that come more naturally to anthropologists or sociologists than to architects.

The idea that we want to put forward is that research that is organized along these three tracks, can come up with an understanding of its object that grasps something of the specificity of its qualities as architecture – namely the interplay between different modes of signification. This aim can be reached by confronting the results of different analytical methods – addressing different combinations of signs, images and life. If it works out well, one can develop out of such a confrontation an understanding that goes beyond the results obtained through the separate analytical methods. To show the potentials of such an approach, we will briefly discuss two cases that work according to these principles.

An exaple of mimesis as critique:
Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum

The analysis of Daniel Libeskind's Jewish museum, which has been extensively elaborated elsewhere[5], investigates how several images are folded into one another in a design process that is regulated by a condition of a semantic void. The aim of the design is to give form to the broken relation between German and Jewish culture, which is most suspiciously characterized by the absence of material (and living) remnants of Jewish culture in Germany. Libeskind's project succeeds in expressing the different aspects of this relation: the mutual ties that persist and proliferate underground, the ineluctable catastrophe of the Holocaust, the cautious hope that a new openness can develop. This is effectuated by a design based upon a mimetic process that uses various themes as raw material in order to bring about a work in which the tension between the different parts is increased to the point of climax. (Figure 1)

Libeskind explicitly mentions several themes that have informed the design.[6] Most important for our analysis are the Star of David drawing, which situates the building within Berlin; the two lines, one straight, the other zigzag, that come forth from his interpreta-

THE BERLIN MUSEUM WITH THE JEWISH MUSEUM, 1989

tion of the Moses und Aaron theme, and the Gedenkbuch, the list of names of those who were murdered or who disappeared during the Holocaust. All these 'images' are translated in a mimetic process which gives rise to the complex plan of the building, which consists of a zigzag volume transected by a number of voids. These voids are five stories high and they form an interrupted straight line. As the visitor follows the zigzag pattern through the museum as dictated by the layout of the building, s/he is repeatedly confronted by these voids, that are nowhere accessible and which seem to be senseless. The flowing movement of the routing breaks down as a result. The character of the space changes at the places where the voids are spanned: the high spacious galleries turn here into narrow low-ceilinged bridges from which one can glimpse the cold gloomy depths of the voids.

The Star of David that Libeskind states as his starting point for the design is a revealing drawing. It is

not only the addresses of the people named in it that give the matrix its form, but also the contours of the Landwehrkanal and the trajectory of the Wall. The latter figures comprise as it were the vertical structuring of the drawing, while a section cut out of the map of Berlin forms the outline of the star. By combining this selection of graphic elements a pattern is created that makes the layout of the new building if not totally clear at least plausible. One recognizes that important components of the history of Berlin are crystallized in the zigzag form of the new extension: the classical pattern of the Friedrichstadt with its rectangular pattern of streets and geometrical squares, the flowing lines of the canal, the broken and shameless line of the Wall, all this is echoed in compressed fashion in the discontinuous shape of the new museum. Unlike a classical site layout plan, what is involved here is not any rational explanation based on the morpho-typological qualities of the new building. Instead the aim is rather to show how different aspects of Berlin as it exists today – both visible and invisible – mimetically converge in a new cutting that is grafted onto this organism. This drawing expresses the inner relationship - the Wahlverwandtschaft or elective affinity, if you like – between a constellation of existing structural elements and the additional urban figure.

The voids are clearly echoes of the Gedenkbuch, the list of names, names in which history is petrified. These names are no abstract numbers but references to individuals who can be traced through their names and their place and date of birth. The paradoxical presence of those who are absent that underlies the Gedenkbuch is taken up in the complex interplay of voids and galleries in the building. Here too what is involved is to make visible what is invisible, to make one feel that which has been repressed. The Holocaust is a black hole in history, a hole that swallows up all rhetoric of progress, but which is invisible to the naked eye. This invisibility is transformed here into an experience that is incomprehensible and yet ineluctable. The visitor will be subjected physically to the confrontation through a series of spatial experiences that can leave few people unmoved: the entrance via the old building and the underground passages; the sloping basement with its complex axes; the endless stair to the upper floors; the sense of disorientation induced by the zigzag shape; the repeated crossing of the voids. These insistent experiences are reminiscent of the unthinkable events that are interwoven into the identity of our present culture.

The design of this building was thus guided by a series of images that were folded into one another thanks to a mimetic process of translation. The modality of 'life' can be seen as the catalyst of the design process, because it corresponds here to a condition of void (the absence of Jewish culture). 'Life' moreover is present in the case because the tactile experience of going through the building takes a prominent place in the analysis. Although it is not stressed in this analysis, the register of signs obviously also played an active part in the whole process, for example because the mere fact of turning the design into a building required a good deal of technical, rational reflection.

Every day environments and the mimetic enactment of another modernity

The second case is part of an extensive study of three environments in Kabylia, Algeria – a traditional village, a colonial town and a new spatial constellation consisting of seven conglomerating villages along a road. Here signs and images of modernity and tradition, of the urban and the rural are being folded into one another by everyday practices of building and dwelling.[7]

Life in the traditional Kabylian villages is no longer what it used to be. The present appearance of many traditional houses in Kabylian villages testifies to the ongoing exodus. The traditional image is still there, with all its appeal described by Bourdieu and others. It is an image formed by the "demon of analogy", full of semantic coherence and correspondence: between the human biography and the life cycle of nature, between the social and the built environment, between sexuality and inhabitation. Migrants' departures and their annual return for holidays, however, disrupt the traditional coherence. The imprint of this disruption is legible in the built fabric. A stable transforms into a kitchen, cupboards and suitcases replace earthenware jars, a weaving loom becomes just a decorative object,
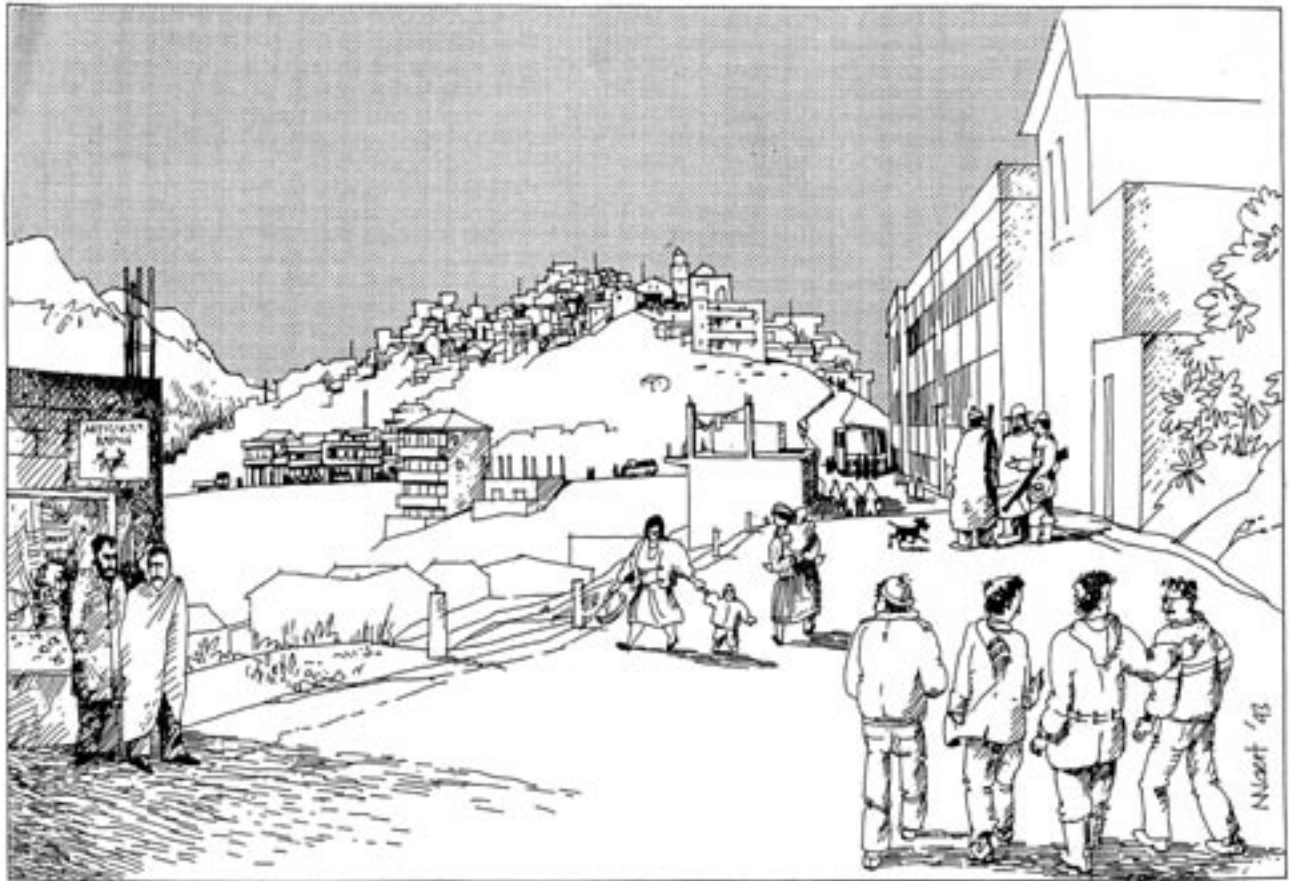
new rooms are built in modern materials, furnished and locked, waiting for a visitor.

The introduction in the seventies and early eighties of modern town planning and modern architectural forms, as implemented in the regional capital city of Tizi Ouzou, often can be understood as the vehicle used by the socialist government for a far-reaching pursuit of modernization and emancipation. The massive building of modern apartment blocks at the outskirts of formerly colonial towns was inspired by the young and independent Algeria's quest for a way out of the burden of old traditions and habits. By offering people leaving villages ruined by the war of independence new dwellings with high standards of modern comfort, it was thought that they would, along with the adoption of new ways of living encoded in the built forms, also embrace new, modern values and attitudes. This architecture operates according to the "political economy of signs" (Baudrillard). It embodies a programmatic modernism that speaks of a new way of life and promises emancipation and progress, built on rationality. People, however, went along only halfway. They came to stay in the city, in order to be near opportunities of work, education and modern amenities, but they did not really 'dwell' there. Their point of reference remained the traditional village, the realm of image and analogy, to which they returned for all matters of importance such as social interaction, annual festivities or funerals. The modern town, functioning according to the mode of 'signs', thus accommodated only part of their lives.

In studying the building practices of returning Berber migrants in the third environment, the Beni Yenni in Kabylia, one notices that they introduce certain ur-

ban activities and building types from their migration career in Paris – shops, garages, apartment buildings. (Figure 2) These new types are grafted in a haphazard way onto the asphalt road that links different neighboring villages of the clan territory. This gradual process results in the development of a spine connecting seven old villages into a kind of new urban agglomeration. By introducing these alien elements, returning migrants construct in a rural environment something that performs like a modern town without actually being one. Out of a contradictory condition of displacement emerges an ambivalent environment that seems to correspond to an equally ambivalent desire for a modern urban life, full of performative signs of modernization, that does not oblige them to lose the cherished village traditions and their collective memory of images and analysis. It is as if the transferred signs of modernity lose their purely instrumental logic and

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acquire an imaginative power in their new context. At the same time images and analogies of a worn out tradition acquire new imported signifiers to reconstruct an enlarged coherence.

The transformation of the road connecting seven clan villages into a proto-urban spine that acts as the main generator of spatial and cultural changes, is not due to the implementation of a coherent planning purpose. It can be seen as a collective staging of individual actions and trials, allowed by the topographical situation of the seven villages and initiated by occasional initiatives of modernization undertaken by the government (monument of war, post office, school, bus stop). A multitude of ad hoc 'bricolages' by the villagers add up with the remarkable interventions by returning migrants, who introduce along the road building types and functions displaced from their migrant journeys.

The formal and functional capacity of the road – referent of a clan territory, landscape feature, morphological backbone, functional support, scene of urban behavior – plays a prime role in a process of mimetic identity formation that seems to succeed in transforming contradiction into ambivalence. The resulting mimesis is a critical one since it aims at correcting both an alien mode of modernization and a tradition that lost its development potential. Concluding their journeys of migration and removal, the Beni Yenni villages outlined the possibility of another urbanity and rurality, an 'otherness' that would enable them to realize their ambivalent desire for both tradition and modernity. It thus seems that this 'architecture without architects' succeeds in reaching a level of signification that goes beyond the traditional village and the modern town, because it embodies an interaction between signs, images and life that generated something genuinely new – another village, another town, which somehow seems to be a very adequate response to the condition of displacement that provoked its emergence.

Notes

1. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, (translation of Dialektik der Aufklärung, 1947), Herder and Herder, New York, 1972, p. 17–18.
2. Dialectic of Enlightenment, p. 18.
3. See also Hilde Heynen, Architecture and Modernity. A Critique, MIT Press, Cambridge (Mass.), 1999, pp. 183–188.
4. Hilde Heynen, André Loeckx, "Scenes of Ambivalence. Concluding Remarks on Architectural Patterns of Displacement", in Journal of Architectural Education, 52–2, Nov. 1998, pp. 100–108.
5. Hilde Heynen, Architecture and Modernity. A Critique, MIT Press, Cambridge (Mass.), 1999, pp. 200–208
6. Daniel Libeskind, Erweiterung des Berlin Museums mit Abteilung Jüdisches Museum, ed. Kristin Feireiss, Ernst & Sohn, Berlin, 1992.
7. This case summarizes the main findings of an extended research programme carried out by the Post Graduate Centre Human Settlements of our Department in cooperation with the Algerian "Centre National d'Etudes et de Recherches Intégrées du Bâtiment". The aim of the research was to elaborate an insight in the often disruptive processes that are mutilating many urban and rural environments in North Algeria. A more complete version of this case study is published in André Loeckx, "Kabylia, the House and the Road: Games of Reversal and Displacement", in Journal of Architectural Education, 52–2, Nov. 1998, pp. 87–99.