

Between Model, Tool, and Exhibition Piece. The Mock-Up in Recent Architectural Theory

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Verification is a fundamental task in the construction process. As architects, we possess numerous instruments to test and validate aspects that affect the various layers constituting architecture—be it the structure, installations, or construction itself. Among these instruments, the *mock-up* seems to enjoy unprecedented attention. Numerous exhibitions, photographic sessions, and essays have transformed these perishable artifacts—whose lifespan is usually limited to the duration of the construction process—into protagonists in their own right. These initiatives surrounding the mock-up focus on distancing themselves from more abstract and strategic approaches to architecture, often linked to tools such as diagrams, to instead emphasize the concrete and the tangible: the technologies that literally constitute architecture.

This fixation on the mock-up is reflected in a specialized bibliography that addresses its role from different perspectives. One of the most recurrent approaches is the gradual terminological separation between the concept of the mock-up and other similar physical models used in architecture.

Christophe van Gerrewey, in *“What Are Men to Rocks and Mountains? The Architectural Models of OMA/Rem Koolhaas”* (2011), distinguishes between clients’ interactions with scale models—more commonly associated with OMA’s work—and mock-ups, which are more closely related to the practice of Herzog & de Meuron. The relationship with the client established through the scale model is based on the principle of “being above everything,” granting the user a sense of external control and a holistic view of the project. In contrast, the mock-up provides a fragmented vision of architecture, positioning the user as “one among many,” allowing them to experience space in the most authentic way possible. For van Gerrewey, the distinction between the two models lies in their mode of user interaction. The scale model confers an almost divine position upon the client, whereas the mock-up enables a more accessible perspective. Both this accessible gaze and its material composition make the mock-up a tool more easily comprehensible than its smaller-scale counterpart.

While this distinction from the scale model is evident at first glance, the task becomes more complex when differentiating the mock-up from another large-scale model: the prototype. Mark and Jane Burry, in *Prototyping for Architects* (2016), point out that the difference between

mock-up and prototype lacks sufficient consensus within architectural practice itself. However, in recent years, many authors have insisted on clarifying this distinction. In his essay *“Manifest Materiality – From the Mind’s Eye to the Architectural Mock-ups”* (2021), Ted Kesik emphasizes separating the mock-up from the prototype based on the production processes in which they are involved. The prototype—strongly tied to the industrial world—is conceived as a model intended for the generation of associated, replicable subproducts. It is commonly linked to the serial production of items such as vehicles, appliances, and other technological devices. In architecture, this term is often restricted to specific components or units, such as doors or windows, but also to prefabricated or modular elements. The mock-up, on the other hand, distances itself from this industrial context, entering architectural practice as a preview of a specific construction, without the expectation of any associated subproduct. The technology exhibited in the mock-up is identical to that which composes the architecture it represents. Through these dissimilarities, the concept of the mock-up begins to gain prominence, previously overshadowed by models such as the scale model or prototype.

In contrast to investigations seeking to situate the mock-up within architectural theory through terminological distinctions, other studies focus on examining it within the internal processes of the discipline itself. Two main approaches emerge, closely tied to specific cultural, political, and economic contexts. In the first, within the U.S. context, University of Florida researcher Nick Gelpi, in *The Architecture of Full-Scale Mock-ups: From Representation to Reality* (2020), describes the functions adopted by mock-ups in seven architectural practices across Europe, Asia, and the Americas. Through ethnographic studies, Gelpi identifies the advantages of using this tool: enabling refinement of architectural concepts without reconsidering primary design decisions and providing data about the intensive properties of materials—those independent of quantity and scale—such as temperature, pressure, or tension. Gelpi assigns the mock-up a fundamental role in architectural production, as a means of verifying the performance of selected technologies. This perspective is influenced by the U.S. context, where a strong litigation culture demands high safety standards in design.

As a counterpoint to Gelpi’s conception, Swiss researcher Michael Eidenbenz proposes a more ambitious understanding of this tool. In *Lloyd’s 1:1. The Currency of The Architectural Mock-up* (2021), Eidenbenz compares the role of the mock-up with the term “experimental system” coined by science historian Hans-Jörg Rheinberger. Within this system, the mock-up is revealed as a technical object—similar, for example, to a microscope—designed to expose the responses generated by an epistemic element, that is, by as-yet-unknown questions and phenomena. Together, they form a constantly evolving symbiosis. Epistemic elements fade as soon as they can be reliably answered by technical objects. However, after the experiment, these technical objects become case studies themselves, capable of revealing the methods employed in the production of knowledge. Eidenbenz justifies the epistemic perspective of the mock-up as a key instrument in the development of the innovative technologies that

compose the Lloyd’s building (1986, London). In contrast to Gelpi’s more passive conception of the mock-up in architectural design, Eidenbenz attributes to it an active role in construction—as an experimental tool—within the Swiss context, characterized by a strong tradition of technological innovation and a robust infrastructure of laboratories dedicated to the material and technical development of architecture.

Beyond approaches that analyze the mock-up in relation to its direct contribution to architectural production, a number of contemporary studies propose readings that, while acknowledging its technical character, expand its meaning toward territories peripheral to the discipline itself. In one of Bruther’s best-known texts, *Framing the Disorder* (2016), the French studio emphasizes the mock-up’s importance in their practice as a technical instrument with an almost scientific dimension. However, alongside references to applied science concepts, notions such as *ready-made* or *objet trouvé* emerge, introducing an interpretation closer to the conceptual realm. Far from contradicting its function as a verification tool, this approach highlights its potential as a communicative artifact, capable of operating simultaneously within technical and symbolic registers.

Five years later, Urtzi Grau and Guillermo Fernández Abascal deepen this process of aestheticization of the mock-up in *A Long List* (2021), focused on analyzing the documentary practices characteristic of contemporary Australian architecture. In a context where legislation limits architects’ roles to pre-construction documentation, the mock-up becomes the best ally to preserve control over the project’s materialization. In this sense, it acts as a physical testimony capable of precisely communicating design decisions. Its redundancy and expressiveness endow it with a singular presence that facilitates its displacement into exhibition spaces—museums, galleries, or biennials—where different agents of the architectural process and the general public can interact with it through a shared and accessible language. Both Bruther’s and Grau and Fernández Abascal’s essays highlight this aesthetic drift of the mock-up, either through discourse or material manipulation, without implying the loss of its instrumental dimension as a verification tool.

The trajectory traced by this recent bibliography on the architectural mock-up not only reveals its transformation as a technical object but also an expansion of its interpretive frameworks. In parallel, it testifies to how the tools of architectural practice are reconfigured in response to new cultural, technological, and symbolic demands. No longer merely a verification instrument, the mock-up acquires epistemological, expressive, and even political dimensions, adapting to the various contexts in which it operates. Whether as a catalyst for material innovation, a vehicle for design control, or an accessible communicative artifact, its versatility compels us to rethink the boundaries between tool and object, between the useful and the representational. This shift does not eliminate its original technical functionality but rather expands it, opening fertile ground for new methodologies, discourses, and interpretations within the discipline. More than a finished product, the mock-up emerges as a space of negotiation between architecture conceived, constructed, and exhibited.