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Ever since the Renaissance, architecture has been shaped by the act of translation from drawing to building—from two-dimensional representation to three-dimensional built substance. With the shift from drafting board to screen, finite sets of geometric projections have made way for tangible models with incorporated construction information that can register every inch of an edifice. The introduction of the computer has fundamentally affected not only the representation and communication of architecture, but also its production. The digital drawing sets architects are expected to produce today suggest a degree of completeness and accuracy that cannot be matched in the dirty reality of construction sites. Analogously, the renderings most corporate clients request simulate a seemingly flawless result, without smudges, stains, or other human traces.

This collapse between the projection and the built is also evident in the architectural model, which has transcended scalar reduction and manual labor, leaving behind iterative processes of cutting and pasting in favor of hyperreality at full size. Staged at night, with dramatic lighting to isolate the structure from its surroundings, David K. Ross’s photograph of Foster + Partners’ full-scale fragment of Penn Medicine’s New Patient Pavilion in Philadelphia (2017–2021) strikingly demonstrates how mock-ups have become a form of proxy architecture at the intersection of two diverging types of labor. The deliberate lack of a human presence in Ross’s Archetypes series (2016-) underlines that the archaic nature of the construction site has been domesticated to mirror the digital realm. Such building fragments—"ruins in reverse," to borrow Robert Smithson’s phrase—which disappear from sites as the actual projects near completion, ensure that a work can be exactly executed to design, but, perhaps more decisively, they provide clients with a simulation of a structure that leaves no space for imagination.

Reminiscent of stage sets, these building fragments have frequently become devices for sampling, rather than the indispensable testing of novel material applications or construction details. But despite their ephemeral purpose, and in contrast to Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s unprecedented lath and canvas “model” for his Kröller-Müller Villa (1912–1913), contemporary construction mock-ups blur the distinction between architecture and its representation; they are built as archetypes, accurately detailed, and constructed as if they could last for eternity. Initially conceived to help architects and builders figure out complex construction processes, what might at first glance look like a device to gain greater control will likely have the opposite effect. Ultimately, the detailed definition of every aspect of a project sidesteps the architect’s agency, which rests in the translation of an idea into reality.