

Metamorphosis: composition of a poetic typology

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Now I am ready to tell how bodies are changed into different bodies...

Ted Hughes, *Tales from Ovid*

Before there was earth or sea or the sky that covers everything, Nature appeared the same throughout the whole world: what we call chaos: a raw confused mass, nothing but inert matter, badly combined discordant atoms of things, confused in the one place.

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*

Introduction

Projects are influenced not simply by similarity of form or categorization of typology, but also by the conditions created by cultural milieus and experiential intent. Beyond the physical and environmental considerations of site, the influences of culture, history, and literature affect the design of new architecture. Within the context of the urban fabric in particular, buildings are always constructed in relation to the surrounding built environment despite the usual claims to conceptual singularity. The construction of the National Poetry Hall of Rome therefore considers the role of its site, Piazza Galeno, as a significant element in its design. The piazza is a public gathering space that also functions a transit hub connecting a number of sites and museums along the length of the city by the system of tram and bus lines, thereby allowing the poetry hall to join this pre-existing network of monuments. The influence of infrastructure is further emphasized by the footprint of the site itself, which is determined by the route of the existing tram tracks that outlines the median of grass and trees.

In a project dedicated to poetry, it seems appropriate that words should form the underlying rhythm of the visitor's journey through the spaces. As such, the poetry hall draws inspiration from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a compilation of myths that describe the continuous and inevitable transformation of all matter, all energies, and all bodies. This theme of transfiguration delves directly into the core of Rome's vitality: the city's constant progression forward through time has caused the various epochs of urban fabric to layer like strata of limestone, compressed and solidified into an ineradicable foundation. However, a project based entirely on the framework of classical literature is anachronistic and would fall short in representing the contemporary understanding of Rome and its poetics. To modernize the narrative, the second reference used was Ted Hughes' *Tales from Ovid*, which translates the ancient and staid passages of these canonical myths into a thoroughly modern retelling that nevertheless retains its poetic and passionate character. Ted Hughes' work parallels in a literary sense the architectural intent of the poetry hall – that is, to present a modern interpretation of Roman mythology as conceived through the lens of Canadian culture. By drawing on the poems of these two writers, the earth can be understood as a uniform matter transformed by the elements to generate various intensities of experience and sensation. These primordial elements are also integral to the production of concrete itself, with the basic mixture composed of earth and water, augmented by the ash of fire, and cured by air. As a result, concrete as a mixture is described in the project as analogous to a poem. In language, the agglomeration of disparate elements results in the creation of a cohesive whole – in the case of concrete, the combination of cement, aggregate, fly ash, Albetan metakoalin, etc. function as the words and letters of the sentences of the narrative.

The National Poetry Hall of Rome draws on references that inspire the narrative, materiality, light, and typology. As a typology, poetry halls occupy an undefined territory of categorization due to the lack of architecture dedicated solely to the art form. The archetype of the poetry hall becomes a fascinating combination of various aesthetic and programmatic references that are translated into architectural spaces. In the following essay, an exploration of the influences behind the project will express the process by which the identity of the National Poetry Hall of Rome was developed from a spectrum of resources beginning with cultural identity and material analysis, to the study of connections between disparate typologies, and finally with the consideration of light as a source of inspiration.

Cultural and material identity

The horizontal axis of spatial urban context acts as the greatest influence on form above the level of the street, while the rest of the project works in conjunction with the vertical axis of temporality that draws on traces of the past. Rome is characterized by stratification of space-time, and much of its socio-political history is physically situated far below the current street level upon which most daily activities take place. This project seeks to extend the visitor's experience from the familiar

layer of the streetscape into the complex subterranean realm with a slow descent from intimate to monumental spaces dedicated to the performance and reading of poetry. Over the course of the visitor's journey, a number of side areas are carved out for both formal and impromptu gatherings for the appreciation of poetry.

The great inclined mass of the café and the slope of the entrance courtyard express the project above ground, as though the extrusion of the mass at one end of the site caused the depression on the other side. These simple slanted forms serve as subtle identifiers that undercut the monumentality expected of the National Poetry Hall of Rome. The entrance piazza is formed out of sienna-coloured concrete that resembles the polished surface and contoured form of concrete skateboard parks, a common urban installation in the street life of the modern Roman city. This deliberate semblance to a skate-bowl is intended to further integrate the poetry hall into the contemporary culture of the city and broaden its appeal to an audience beyond the expected group of intellectuals, such as youths and casual passers-by. The public is encouraged to gather informally in the space, which functions as an updated interpretation of the Roman amphitheatre with its smooth semi-circular form and blank *scaenae frons* retaining wall that purposefully rejects the typical articulation of visual depth¹. Perhaps the greatest influence on this courtyard's design, however, is the Piazza del Campo, located in the great city of Siena. The choice of sienna colouring for concrete is intended as homage to this successful piazza, where the human proportions of the design act as the stage for civic gathering and discourse while maintaining the theatricality of its slope towards the Torre del Mangia².

On the other side of the site, the café rises as an inclined mass that incorporates organic life with built-up concrete form. The duality of man-made and nature-formed is emphasized by the growth of plants in the cracks of the concrete surfaces that were deliberately and forcefully roughened. It is a duality that is referential of Jamie North's "Terraforms 2014". He incorporates the waste- and by-products of industrial processes that are typically associated with architectural construction such as coal-ash, marble waste, and steel slag in the construction of concrete columns³. As implied by the title of the project, these semi-eroded pillars are manipulated to serve as an appropriate base for the growth of various flora species native to Australia, such that these monumental forms appear to bear resemblance to archaeological ruins that have been overcome, through the progress of time, by nature⁴. It is a parallel that evokes strongly the history of Rome as a city of concrete in various stages of degradation from the elements. The contrast between the clean edges of the platonic form and the textured, 'natural' faces is an architectural translation of the exploration undertaken by Snarkitecture on their shelf series. The range of finishes possible with concrete make it one of the most expressive materials with regards to how it interacts with the senses of touch and sight. Certain indentations in the monolith act as micro-courtyards that serve as seating areas for intimate personal poetry readings as well as passengers waiting at the tram stations.

Meanwhile, below the surface of the street, the museum descends deep into the ground, giving little indication of its inner workings save for the manipulation of the surface of the street plane to form the amphitheatre and café. It resists the weight of the earth with sloping concrete retaining walls, poured directly between the framework and the dirt to build up, layer by layer, the depth of the project. At this point, the physical construction of the concrete envelope takes direction not from cultural references but from the geologic sources that existed prior to the implications of human presence. The stratum of geologic cross-sections reveal the complex layering of the sediment that composes the soil, essentially visual records of the earth's history. The visibility of

¹ Amy Russell, *The Politics of Public Space in Republican Rome*, (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016) 175.

² "Piazza del Campo in Siena", *Discover Tuscany*, accessed August 15, 2016 at <https://www.discovertuscany.com/siena/piazza-del-campo.html>.

³ "The synthesis of natural and artificial by Jamie North", *Thisispaper*, Aug. 1, 2016 accessed at <http://thisispaper.com/jamie-north-terraforms/>.

⁴ "The synthesis of natural and artificial by Jamie North".



Fig.1: Skate bowl of a BMX park (detail)



Fig.2: Piazza del Campo integrated into the daily life of the city



Fig.3: Terraforms installation



Fig.4: Terraforms (detail)



Fig. 5: contrast of the clean edges and rough surfaces in the Shelve series



Fig. 6: copper-coloured quarry walls



Fig. 7: aerial view of stepped quarry

aggregation already exists as a by-product of the process of poured concrete where the necessity of curing requires that construction be completed in phases. The curing time of concrete is dependent on factors of the environment such as temperature and humidity. In this sense, the process of concrete is similar to poetry in that it requires patience and the passage of time to complete for both the maker and the visitor. The project proposes that the layers of concrete are poured in intervals of 400mm thickness with a curing period of 14 days for each pour, resulting in an obvious gradient of hue that visibly exposes the passage of time like a limestone cliff.

However, the primary step in the construction of the poetry hall is the excavation – the creation of a void. The practical procedure of excavating soil from the ground implies also the poetic theory that the void is a prerequisite for creation of mass. Only once empty space is exposed can the concrete begin to fill and space the internal spaces. Therefore, if we consider the process of construction as a closed-loop system, then the redistribution of matter is clearly exemplified by the chasm and its infill; mass and space are united architectonic elements that exist co-dependently. This subtractive procedure also parallels the quarries from which the aggregate of the concrete was sourced and collected, which uncovers another reference for the atmosphere of the project – the quarry itself envisioned as a site of an exposed abyss. The form of the quarry is determined by the extraction of material for use at a foreign site, leaving behind a depressed cavity. Despite industrial origins, quarries, once abandoned, are often viewed as sites of beauty and austerity despite their unconscious design. Therefore, despite the drastic difference in program and purpose, the quarry serves as a valuable reference for the treatment of material and voids in the poetry hall's architecture. The connection is visible in the textures of the shear walls designed as though rough-cut like the steep walls of a mineshaft.

Typological dilemma

As discussed, poetry halls exist as a subset of the typology of performance halls that lacks a clearly defined range of immediate architectural precedents. Grand performance spaces are more often designed for music or theatre, more popular forms of entertainment that appeal to a greater audience, with poetry relegated to the sidelines of creative expression. Poetry readings are typically an intimate or individual affair often performed in spaces designed for another function (such as community centers or even bars), leading to a lack of clear typological archetypes for the design of a poetry hall. While the obvious argument may be to imitate other types of performance spaces such as opera houses or theatres due to their dramatic nature, these similarities of program are but artificial connections. In the search for precedents that accurately convey the spirit of poetry, there are three specific examples of a museum, library, and pavilion that are notable for the use of concrete in the formal expression of narrative and rhythm, two integral aspects of poetic composition.

The first precedent is found on the small island of Teshima, a white amorphous form trembling like a raindrop in the middle of the grasslands. Ryue Nishizawa's design for the Teshima Art Museum purposefully defies the expected programmatic and formal elements associated with the typology of museum, the internal space appearing at first glance to be 'empty' of artwork⁵. By defining the museum around its spatial qualities, the project is no longer obstructed by partitions, labels, or signage. The compositional power of the project is primarily revealed through the choice of material, namely concrete, whose capability to move from liquid to solid state is harnessed by Nishizawa in order to construct a smooth 250mm thin concrete skin straddling the boundary between interior and exterior⁶. It focuses the attention of the observer purely on the form of the concrete membrane that acts as the division between space, a skin that is punctured by voids that allow the intrusion of natural elements that normally have no place in a museum. As a result, the

⁵ Raymund Ryan, "Teshima Art Museum", *Domus* December 9, 2010 accessed online at <http://www.domusweb.it/en/architecture/2010/12/09/teshima-art-museum.html>.

⁶ Ibid.

museum's intensity relies on the qualities of light, wind, and water, as augmented by Rei Naito's installation, to immerse the body of the visitor fully into the sensation of the space⁷. The simplicity of spatial form and textural surfaces emphasizes the visitor's perception of the slightest variations of the sensory assemblage, a condition of sensitivity that is analogous to the subtlety of poetry readings where the audience's attention is captured by the nuances of diction and verbalization.

In contrast, the concrete monolith of the Seashore Library by Vector Architects sits on the white sandy shores of Nandaihe, the steadfastness of the library standing in contrast to the dynamism of the ocean waves⁸. Whereas the exterior resembles a solid fortress and offers few glimpses inside, the interior spaces are complexly sculpted to augment the natural light and direct views out towards the sea. Both the ceiling and ground surfaces are manipulated in tandem to produce a sequence of spaces that are characterized by varying heights, light quality, and spatial perception according to program. For instance, low-slung lamps and the strip of skylight dimly illuminate the meditation room, in direct contrast to the tiered central reading hall that steps down towards a bright panoramic view of the water as though facing a stage⁹.

The fluidity of circulation is inspired by Lookout Point Ruta del Peregrino, a cast-concrete structure that was designed by HHF Architects as one of the eight proposed landmarks along the 117km-long pilgrimage route Ruta del Peregrino extending across Mexico¹⁰. The Lookout Point pavilion is intended to serve as a key point for travelers to rest and take shelter while providing an alternative vantage point from which to appreciate the landscape of the Mexican countryside. The staircases leading from the viewing platform are incorporated into a single definitive path of ascent and descent may be interpreted as a symbolic model of the movement of the pilgrimage itself, whose route traverses the mountain range of Jalisco in such a way that devotees must climb 2000 meters to reach the peak before descending to the town where the Virgin of Talpa is housed¹¹. It seems to correspond to the architect's conception of the project as an "additional loop" to the journey, with the formal execution of the project reflecting the distinctly circular movement of the pilgrims and their journey¹².

These projects demonstrate the versatility of concrete as a material to express poetic intention and spatial narrative. In a museum such as the Teshima Art Museum where the architecture is built to augment the art piece, the form is used to intensify the body's perception of subtle sensations. The sloping blank enclosure and its minimalist aesthetic can be said to parallel the convention of printed poetry publications, where each page is dedicated to a single poem and insulated with plenty of white space. By virtue of negative space, the reader is removed from distraction and directed to focus on the words – their meaning as well as their shape. This is translated architecturally into 'blank' austere walls removed of ornament and 'empty' contemplative spaces that sharpen the visitor's senses during performances and readings. The desire for a contemplative atmosphere is shared by the typological archetype of the library, which also works towards spatial conditions that strengthen concentration. In the Seashore Library, a series of spaces are separately shaped provide a number of ways to appreciate the printed word, ranging from individual to communal readings. In the poetry hall, which focuses on the *spoken* word, the design

⁷ Ryan, "Teshima".

⁸ Jessica Mairs, "Vector Architects completes a seaside library with board-marked concrete walls", *dezeen magazine*, May 19, 2015 accessed at <http://www.dezeen.com/2015/05/19/vector-architects-seashore-library-coast-china-board-marked-cast-concrete-walls/>.

⁹ Mairs, "Vector Architects".

¹⁰ Marcus Fairs, "Ruta del Peregrino: Lookout Point by HHF Architects", *dezeen magazine*, January 9, 2016 accessed at <http://www.dezeen.com/2009/01/09/ruta-del-peregrino-lookout-point-by-hhf-architects/>.

¹¹ Amy Frearson, "Ruta del Peregrino: Lookout Point by HHF Architects", *dezeen magazine*, May 31, 2011 accessed at <http://www.dezeen.com/2011/05/31/ruta-del-peregrino-lookout-point-by-hhf-architects-2/>.

¹² HHF, "Ruta del Peregrino", 2003, accessed Aug. 10, 2016 at http://www.hhf.ch/hhf/projects/projects/049-ruta_del_peregrino.html.



Fig. 8: interior view showing the thinness of the concrete shell



Fig. 9: looking out of the void towards the sky



Fig. 10: manipulation of the ceiling and walls surfaces



Fig. 11: exterior view of the Lookout Point

of performance conditions is similar in that a variety spaces are designed ranging from intimate, impromptu readings to full-scale theatrical epics, with the added spatial and textural consideration of acoustics. Finally, the cylindrical Lookout Point influenced the design of circulation where the flow of people proceeds along a path that shifts in altitude. The sequential journey of the poetry hall incorporates the same concept of descent and ascent, punctuated by points of contemplation and gathering. In these aforementioned projects, it is the shaping of the interior voids that serves as the precedent for the poetic narrative, an unfolding experience that flows smoothly and without interruption between the programmatic and spatial conditions. That capability of concrete to express beauty through internal void is a strength of the material process that transcends typological division.

Light as expression

Beyond the discussion of typology, the experiential *tour de force* of the subterranean National Poetry Hall of Rome is the expression of light. As a concealed void buried beneath the surface of the street, darkness is the norm. The scarcity of light causes its presence in an underground space to achieve certain sanctity, similar to that of the spiritual glow that is often attributed to religious architecture. As such, churches become the obvious choice of precedent for the lighting design of a poetry performance space. Light then becomes a driving factor of the design of the museum, one that is used to great effect in an underground space. These religious references highlight the parallels that exist between a place of worship and poetry hall, as both serve as places of gathering for people to partake in the elucidation of text.

The intersection of modern lighting techniques and massive medieval architecture is represented in the latest renovation of St. Moritz church, the oldest parish in Germany, where a collaborative effort promotes a minimalist aesthetic based around a dynamic shifting of light quality. In conjunction with John Pawson, Mindseye Lighting firm designed a white-light scheme that responds to the internal programs and temporal conditions. Most effectively, the interior is continuously transformed by the transition from neutral light (4000K) during the day to warm light (2700K) during the evening services¹³. By recessing the fixtures and LED strips in the thickness of the wall, the design focuses attention on the lights rather than the mechanisms behind them. The brightest glow illuminates the apse of the church, emphasizing the contrast between the volumes of the minimalist architecture and the Baroque details of the sculptures displayed in the space¹⁴. Natural sunlight entering through the church's pre-existing apse windows is diffused by the replacement of glass with thin slices of onyx in order to combine it seamlessly with the ambience of artificial luminescence¹⁵.

As in Christianity, light and its symbolism also featured heavily in the design of Islamic mosques. According to the Architectural Review, mosques function more like as a public gathering space rather than a sacred place¹⁶. This is due to the nature of Islamic devotion, whereby the act of prayer is free from spatial obligation and completed entirely by the individual without the necessity of ritual or supervision of an imam¹⁷. Most modern mosques are under political and ideological pressure to conform to the traditions set by the great builder Sinan, imitating the

¹³ Elizabeth Donoff, "2014 AL Design Awards: St. Moritz Church, Augsburg, Germany", *Architectural Lighting Design Awards*, August 12, 2014, accessed at http://www.archlighting.com/design-awards/2014-al-design-awards-st-moritz-church-augsburg-germany_o.

¹⁴ Donoff, "St. Moritz".

¹⁵ Rose Etherington, "St Moritz Church by John Pawson", *Dezeen Magazine*, July 13, 2013, online resource at <http://www.dezeen.com/2013/07/31/st-moritz-church-by-john-pawson/>.

¹⁶ Uğur Tanyeli, "Profession of Faith: Mosque in Sancaklar, Turkey by Emre Arolat Architects", *The Architectural Review*, July 13, 2014, online resource at <http://www.architectural-review.com/today/profession-of-faith-mosque-in-sancaklar-turkey-by-emre-arolat-architects/8666472.fullarticle>.

¹⁷ Tanyeli, "Profession".



Fig. 12: hidden LED lighting system



Fig. 13: soft illumination through windows



Fig. 14: wash of light on the Kiblah wall

stereotypical forms and ornaments with modern techniques and materials¹⁸. It is for this reason that the Sancaklar Mosque on the outskirts of Istanbul serves as a radical departure from the self-referential direction that many newly-built mosques follow. In fact, the success of this project is particularly noteworthy since many modern mosques that diverge from the historical precedent have received immediate backlash from the political-religious community. The clarity of architect Emre Arolat's concept lies in his purposeful reinterpretation of the core tenets of Islamic worship, rather than a blind rebellion against pre-existing norms¹⁹. Although there are multiple aspects of the design that express this narrative departure, the use of light as an architectonic tool is perhaps the most effective in re-establishing the poetics of the mosque's elements. In place of the typical heavily ornamented niche that defines *mihrab* (a recess in the wall that indicates the direction towards Mecca) is a beam of light that serves the same purpose of articulation²⁰. According to the architect, the intention was for the building to meld with the surrounding nature with little adornment of the interior or exterior facades such that "its only decoration is the light that washes the Kiblah wall"²¹. In fact, the ascetic nature of light in the contoured enclosure of concrete achieves a level of spiritual quality that references the modest conditions of the prophet Muhammad's revelation in a confined cave on Mount Hira²².

As exemplified in these precedents, the choreography of light is capable of transforming the spatial perception and experiential narrative of an architectural space. In the case of the poetry hall, illumination is designed in response to the gradient of conditions set by program, texture, and intimacy. On the street level, the complete exposure to the atmosphere means that external forces of sunlight and cloud cover determine entirely the effects of shadow and light in the entrance courtyard. The café is also similarly affected, though the inclusion of artificial fixtures is a necessary supplement for the functioning of the program. Once on the lower floor, natural light is mediated by the built form and simultaneously filtered indirectly from the café above and reflected inwards by the sloping surface of the piazza. The diffusion results in more controlled luminescence through the use of concealed fixtures that, similar to the scheme at St. Moritz, emphasize the form and texture of the concrete surfaces through the use of a divine 'light-without-source'. The culmination of this strategy is most clearly expressed in the design of the feature wall that confronts the visitor upon entering into the lobby of the poetry hall. The quality of light in the rest of this entrance corridor is restrained and subdued, allowing attention to be drawn towards the expanse of textured concrete whose slight inclination allows for a flood of light that brings the subtleties of wall into sharp relief. This luminescence acts as the decorative element in the space, replacing the sculptural ornamentation that typically occupies the arrival area of museums and performance halls. By relying on the simplicity of light as a means of articulating form and inspiring contemplation, the poetry hall adopts the same method of demarcating functional elements as the *mihrab* of the Sancaklar Mosque. On the lowest level that houses the monumental performance hall, light is heavily restricted to the illumination of the stage and minimal way-finding, so as to emphasize, through the presence of shadow, the depth of the journey and the weight of the concrete form above.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Tanyeli, "Profession".

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Kirsten Kiser, "Sancaklar Mosque: Emre Arolat Architects", *arcSPACE.com*, December 14, 2015, <http://www.arcSPACE.com/features/emre-arolat-architects/sancaklar-mosque/>.

²² Tanyeli, "Profession".

Conclusion

In the discussion of typological study, the poetry hall exists as an archetype that resists definition. The intimacy of spoken word within the context of poetic expression requires an architectural design that enhances the subtleties of the art form through minimalism of surface and form. The lack of chronological precedent for the performance of poetry in particular requires that reference material be gathered from alternative sources and collected to form a collage of imagery that informs the aesthetic and programmatic concept. It is the diversity of resources that is the driving force behind the layered design of the National Poetry Hall of Rome. The incorporation of literary and urban references of Italy, from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to skate-parks, is compressed into the temporal narrative of the poetry hall to reflect the abundance of history in the country. The distinct inspiration from cultural and geological stratification results in the translation of poetic narrative to spatial form and textural sensation. In fact, the process of concrete production in its entirety provides inspiration for the conditions of excavation and composition expressed in the sculpting of the internal spaces. In addition, the project incorporates aspects of a range of typological references independent of programmatic connection (but with a common material), including a museum, library, and lookout point – diverse precedents that influence the atmosphere, form, and circulation of the design. Finally, illumination is employed as the means of emphasizing the form with reference to religious architecture where light functions as a mediator between body and mind. With the assortment of precedents and the connections drawn between them, the typology the poetry hall can become clearer by association. The contemplation of text and the performance of the spoken word is a cultural experience that permeates nearly all architectural spaces, and thus diversity of inspiration is not only indisputable but also a celebration of the past.

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Fig. 1: Charles Schug, *Lines and curves of a concrete surface skateboard and BMX bike park*. No graffiti. Port Angeles, Washington, 2008.

Fig. 2: Jong-Lantick M, *Piazza del Campo*, n.d. photograph, viewed 15 August, 2016.

Fig. 3: Jamie North, *Terraforms installation view*. Foreground- Portal I 2014, 2 components- 165.0 x 26.0 x 26.0 cm. Background- The Inconstant Ones 2014, 2 components- 223.0 x 26.0 x 26.0 cm and 191.0 x 26.0 x 26.0 cm. Photograph. 2014.

Fig. 4: Jamie North, *The Inconstant Ones (detail)*. Photograph. 2014.

Fig. 5: Snarkitecture. *Shelve (detail)*. Photograph. 2012.

Fig. 6: Tito Mouraz, *Yellowtrace*. Photograph. 2012.

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Fig. 8: Iwan Baan. *Teshima Art Museum - Entrance*. Photograph. Domus 942, December 2010.

Fig. 9: Iwan Baan. *Teshima Art Museum - Interior*. Photograph. Domus 942, December 2010.

Fig. 10: Xia Zhi. *Light streaming into the interior of the Seashore Library by Vector Architects*. Photograph. 2015.

Fig. 11: Iwan Baan. *Lookout Point – Ruta del Peregrino (Route of Pilgrim)*. Photograph. 2010.

Fig. 12: Hufton + Crow, *Interior Remodeling of St. Moritz Church / John Pawson - Side Chapel*. Photograph. 2013.

Fig. 13: Hufton+Crow, *Interior Remodeling of St. Moritz Church / John Pawson - Altar*. Photograph. 2013.

Fig. 14: Özgün Öztürkçine, *Sancaklar Mosque - İstanbul*. n.d. photograph, viewed April 12, 2016.