Sheds for Antarctica
The Environment for Architectural Design and Practice

A project submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgment has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Graham Crist
30 March 2010

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I consider all the projects cited in this document to be co-authored. My partners at Antarctica – Brendan Jones, Peter Johns, and Simon Whibley, along with all members of Antarctica, in particular Nicola Garrod and Ben Inman – are acknowledged. Each has contributed to the projects and to the development of a unique practice environment. Before the establishment of Antarctica, Stuart Harrison was a significant collaborator and design partner, as was Sarah Cope.

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My family – Sarah, Lydia and Clara – has contributed much else.

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Abstract

This document frames the architectural practice of Antarctica; a young practice environment characterised by loose collaboration and participation in diverse activities. The architectural projects forming this research have surfaced these three central ideas: about a mode of practice, a type of architectural space, and an ethical position towards architecture. The document reflects on these through the lens of a series of themes: noise, junk, longevity, and participation, and through the architectural model of the shed, which is characterised by loose and robust space. Together these reflections form a position towards sustainability that is applicable to architecture. That position foregrounds participation in the breadth of building’s imperfect environment, accommodation of change in that environment, and an open robust design process. It sets out a territory for Antarctica’s ongoing design research.

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The method for this research is a reflection on architectural practice via the design of architectural projects. The process of extracting this phi/ from my design research commenced in late 2005, coinciding with the formation of the architectural practice Antarctica, and with the start of a position as Program Director in architecture at RMIT University. These environments formed the context for the design work. Juggling the demands of the practitioner academic, negotiating the development of a new practice structure at Antarctica, along with a new program structure at RMIT, have strongly influenced this research and my position toward architectural design. Questions of negotiation and participation have grown from the projects, while questions concerned with the organisation of this body of work into a legible story have grown into the structure of this document and its exhibition.

The Graduate Research Conference (GRC) at RMIT gives structure to the process of research development via its biannual critiques. In that context the process is like a chronological diary of the working method. The practice context developed in a more haphazard way; with a growing pile of projects starting, stopping and restarting, remaining unfinished, being revisited, or being abandoned. This document weaves together the techniques used for extracting the phi, namely, thematic essays, a record of the GRC process, and a diagramming of the body of design project work, with drawn and written descriptions. The essays form a linear thread to the document and structure its sections. Alongside these, the descriptions of the projects form an expanded set of margin footnotes that are partially independent of the thematic essay. A chronological record of the GRC process also sits in the margins of the text, recounting the fruited search for useful insight from the projects. This parallel text aims to retain the suggestion that one project follows another and is an outcome of the previous, or that one theme supersedes the other. Rather, each group of projects has been gathered under the umbrella theme which most fully encapsulates the dominant ideas within. Yet, to varying degrees, all of the works embody the collection of ideas described. Delineation is provisional.

1. Noise

Noise addresses the problem of too much information – the project observations and the mess of practice which make a simple story difficult. It includes the observations of colleagues and mentors, the cultural context of the projects. It grows from the need to gather together the body of design work and make sense of it rather than propose a project as emblematic of that body. It aims to diagram the inadequacy of any one overarching idea in explaining a body of architectural work.

2. Junk

Junk is a revisiting of old design work which lay dormant without proper reflection. Its review has resurfaced an unfinished interest in the unfinished; in discarded and reused information, or built-fabrics. It includes the observations of colleagues and mentors; the cultural context of the project observations and the mess of practice which grew out of the design studios at RMIT dealing directly with questions of long life in building.

3. Longevity

Longevity describes the ingredient of time in the design process, accommodating the loose and contingent qualities of architectural space. It describes the projects which first responded overtly to this field and which grew out of the design studios at RMIT dealing directly with questions of long life in building.

4. Accretion

Accretion is a development of Longevity and an expansion of Noise, observed as the practice body of work grew, where new ideas were added to old ideas still in place. It continues a discussion of the role of things outside our direct control, in the making of architectural form.

5. Participation

Participation sets out another layer and identifies themes already discussed as part of a broader agenda; of why questions of time and noise might be useful in expanding architecture’s field. It discusses projects which engage directly with questions of sustainability and of collaboration. These sections aggregate to an outcome which is the reflective description of a developing architectural practice embodied in its design projects. The shape of the argument follows an arc; where at its centre, a close examination of some key projects mark a turning point in my thinking. They have in turn allowed the broader sweep of projects to describe the noisy environment for that thinking. That description is found in the exhibition of the work, and in this document.
A camel is a horse designed by committee. This little cliché is a warning about compromise, and about collective bungling and unnecessary complexity, against the purer or rigorous design process. Even when I first heard this expression I had two thoughts. First, a camel looks better than a horse; second — it is better to work in a committee than to work alone.

The camel/committee proverb embodies two key interests of this architectural research; the form of the camel (the form of the impure design project), and the process of making that camel — the committee that produces such a particular form. The projects in this work aim to demonstrate the form of the camel, and the nature of the committee that produces it.

What is a committee? I mean this very broadly; it is the people who surround the table and participate in the design process; it is the physical environment which makes up its context; the mental space which forms its backdrop, and a wide range of pressures which surround that space — dull administrative things and annoying things such as money. It is not one more than the other, not a matter of choosing; it is the juggling of each of these in varying degrees. The committee is the social complexity of the design process. It is full of noise.

Jeremy Till describes these conditions as contingency, and argues the importance of being responsive to contingency. That narrative is coupled with a suspicion of form-making and of the professional values which protect the activity of making built form. My ambivalence toward those views forms a key question of this research. Participation in the contingent world has a form, though it might not be the form we expect. So: what is the architectural form of contingency, or: what does the camel look like?

A camel is known as a survivor. It is the animal navigating the desert without need of water. Where the thoroughbred horse is precious and delicate and high performance, the camel we imagine as robust and resilient; adapted to a hostile environment. These are important and recurring themes of the design projects; how the design process survives and adapts to the committee or to contingency, how resilience is a vital quality of the designed object. It is a quality that allows it to adapt to social complexity, and to the pressing needs of its environment.

Camels are all around us — perhaps most visibly at the fringe of architectural culture, perhaps especially in Melbourne. They have been well described locally with other animal analogies — as the mongrel, as the sow’s ear, or as the by-product of the Autistic Ogler. They are part of an immediate context of the city which is important to our design work.

A committee takes time. It is a stereotype of the committee that it wastes time, that it delays, dithers and refuses to decide. But at its best, that time is a consideration of complexity — a process that produces something robust and enduring. This contrasts with the understanding of design as an inspired moment, or as something rapid and automated. The framing themes of the projects are elaborations of time; junk, longevity, accretion, and sustainability. Each talk about altering the use-by date for architecture. One of the main shifts produced by the work of this research is a consideration of questions of time. How can the design process be understood as elongated in time, seen through a longer time frame? How can it account for the ‘before and after’ of momentary design actions?

In the work of carrying out these projects and of subsequently reconsidering them, the aim was an adjustment of our design process — a recasting of the camel and of the committee — to better understand the work of one design practice, and what that practice might tell us about questions of participation in design. It aims to provide some tools to talk about architectural form that are not dependent on purity, and at very least, allow for an exploration of the difference between the applied environment of practice, and that of pure research.

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1. Architecture Depends, 2009

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Fig. 3: Greenhouse at Federation Square, Melbourne, construction 2008
There is a gap between the way architectural design is often described and the experience of architectural practice. There is a gap between the things with which architectural practice must contend and the forms and methods we often employ through design. That gap has to do with the environmental noise that surrounds the design process. I like the noise of the environment around me because I like to be in the world; fully in the world. I want to be open to the noise of the environment around me, and I need to be open to the noise of that environment because I have a responsibility to listen and to respond. This work will attempt to describe what I mean by noise in this sense, and what implications this has for architectural design.

Architectural design and research are usually described in clear, coherent stories, neatly tied up. Architectural practice is often not like that—just as it is not like the traditional descriptions of work used to teach us professional practice. Those neat narratives are told in chronologies, in styles and around the signature author. They describe a progression of one thing to another. This is not my experience of the design process. Chronologies get messy as projects overlap, slow down and get overtaken. They go backwards, they pause and then restart. They are left unfinished. We return to them again and again, even after we think they are finished. Similar complications emerge when asking who is responsible for the work. We rarely work alone, yet so often the architectural story is told in terms of solo authorship. The rules and conventions which governed design—classicism, decorum, styles—have partly been replaced by the authority given to the individual—the significant practitioner. The history of twentieth century architecture was the history of a handful of great architects who were differentiated from their surroundings. It is though, rarely this simple.

The way architecture is described affects the way it is practiced. It is my contention that for a number of reasons, the noisy environment for architecture is very often excised and suppressed, and that architects also employ this tactic in thinking about design. Describing architecture is made simpler and cleaner by excising it from a context. This is clearly evident (for example) in architectural photography and publication—cropping out urban neighbours, removing signs of activity or the mess of a building’s interior, and carefully framing the context of a work by selectively removing its actual context. Some of the more extreme examples of this phenomenon come from the contemporary techniques of digital enhancement. Similarly, architectural drawing tends to place its objects on a neutral background. The keenest example of this is the rendered 3D model on a black background. It is a technique which foregrounds isolated composition, and suppresses its environment. Published photographs of architecture and drawings alike are edited and enhanced. Design journals carefully frame images, removing most evidence of the everyday. They focus instead on the skills of the architect in creating a better version of reality.

Introduction: Being open to Noise

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the practice of Antarctica has become an environment that adds noise to the design process simply by having several views available at once. This is not to interrogate the methods or the characters in order to demonstrate the originality, the uniqueness, the new knowledge in a society are likely to do the same as to what extent we as partners might their tendency towards purity and away from contingency be just a precedent.

The general notion that architecture responds to its physical context and that form is influenced by its context is a reasonable one. That idea, at least in the Australian urban context, has been frequently confused and conflated with its opposite, the ideal city. In an attempt to control the redevelopement of urban fabric and its scale and to reign in the effects of modernity, the rhetoric of the contextual is brought to bear as a constraint, but is framed by an ideal of a consistent urbanist model. The logic then is contradictory; operating in a 19th century urban village, design should respond to this contextual model; when operating in a heterogeneous urban fabric, form design should conform to the previous ideal model. The discourse is even more blurred in a practice environment, where this notion has found its way into open source software, using terms like ‘preferred context’. It has given architectural response to context a restrictive connotation, since it exists not because of the acceptance of the built environment, but because of a set of beliefs about urban decorum and purity.

Design processes with their own rigorously applied internal rules have the potential to shift the focus away from the single authoring mind, and toward a set of environmental circumstances, or even to chance. Letting noise or contingency into the process, it is even less predictable. This goes back to the automatic drawing of the Surrealists. Rule based processes are one of the points. For example, the Mobius House in Melbourne. We are each from a region closely related to the Southern Oceans. Nicola Garrod and Ben Jenks of practice Port Melbourne. It is mental centre. It was a move from a time of letting our modes of operation, rule based processes, seem like a private chatroom. Software rules that people dropped out of the cloud. The logic meant that we are open ready to share our idea. Some warned that it was replacing face to face communication. We moved to a hybrid — developing the rules and processes through the shortcomings of a wiki, and allowing informal review by all. We moved to a hybrid model that allows the informal to meet the formal, treating like a private chatroom. Software rules that people dropped out of the cloud. The closeness meant that we are open ready to share our ideas. Some warned that it was replacing face to face communication. We moved to a hybrid — developing the rule based process through the shortcomings of a wiki, and allowing informal review by all.
The desire for a practice of several disciplines has been present from the start. It has evoked slavery, first, if too late and effort to assimilate or understanding of our own discipline. For ourselves. Second, we increasingly need the diversity of case local practices as a form of each disciplinary. Third, it was perhaps not surprising wall design became the other discipline. More than structure, landscape, architecture, or building. The web is a community architecture, a model of communication.

One, that the vast majority of our built environment was dismissed as ugly or worthless. The other, which follows, that our design culture was built from the top down upon the observation of other, more important cultural elsewhere. Each conforms architectural design to the role of an observer; watching and whispering, or watching and applauding. The statement became spatialized (or caricatured) in a city composed of a central business district of corporate towers by international offices, surrounded by a low rise wasteland.

We therefore suggest that the city is not just a few chosen designers. So successful is their reading of the city that each building in

More than structure, landscape, architecture, or building. The web is a community architecture, a model of communication.

A functional diagram — a responsive mapping of a set of circulation relationships. Looking at the visual evidence it is strangely silent on the discipline about which we knew so little. The desire for the participation of several disciplines has been present from the start. It has evoked slavery, first, if too late and effort to assimilate or understanding of our own discipline. For ourselves. Second, we increasingly need the diversity of case local practices as a form of each disciplinary. Third, it was perhaps not surprising wall design became the other discipline. More than structure, landscape, architecture, or building.
The “no good” quality of Lacaton and Vassal’s work in France perhaps comes from the experience of Africa – an environment hyper-conscious of resources and an antidote to the completeness of the French environment. It was the ready-made shed houses (fig. 18) that first drew my attention to this practice, and to its resonance with my own. The unfinished and incomplete is a stated invitation to the user, or anyone else, to complete the experience; to fill in the holes. In the case of the Palais de Tokyo, that incompleteness is a provocation to the artwork, and a realisation of the spatial generosity of the ageing recycled building. It is possible to imagine the architect here as a kind of observer – who has swung their vision around to watch those in the building; watching and hoping as they try to provoke participation in an interest.

The attempts to draw together projects and make sense of the resultant set is driven by the formation of a group with a shared mental library, and a group participating in a broad set of design activities. It is an attempt to describe the multi-focused environment of design. The tension lies in describing a set of ideas without clipping those ideas from their context. As data accumulates, the picture does not get any clearer or simpler, rather the opposite. The diagrams here aim at least to provide a picture of this situation.

Assigning each project a point in a set makes them appear, superficially at least, to be random. Each is of equal value, each equally related to all others. The size of the set is important. In a very small set, it is possible to see each project as emblematic of a strategy; perhaps as it reaches a certain mass, certain trends appear in the set. Neither is really the case here. Rather, we might think of strategies as a net thrown over projects, a temporary curation, where there is always a project caught in the wrong net trying to get out. Conversely, we could see the projects as gathering around a strategy, able to move along with it or move away from it. Similarly, a project might gather strategies and tactics around it with varying degrees of attachment. It is a story of loose and fluid relationships between projects and their informing ideas.

Do the ideas and strategies embodied in projects change over time? A classic way of measuring this, and describing thematic development, is via a chronology. Ideally, that development is demonstrated by superseding older and inferior ideas; one project is spent, another begins and is improved by demonstrated learning from the last. In many practices the chronology is complicated by projects which vary wildly in duration, and in `bandwidth’ (the proportion of time or energy occupied on a particular project). So some projects can be executed intensely over a short time frame, while others trickle. Many lurch from one to the other – an intense (fat) activity being combined with a longer period of occasional (thin) work. This effect is exaggerated if we take account of the whole project, including for example, its construction in the design process. The effect on the ‘progression’ of

Lacaton and Vassal

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ideas is distorted, in which practice we might return to a project long after we have moved on in our immediate interests.

Size.

There is little relationship in this set between the size of a project and its impact either in time, or perceived importance. This is despite the effect of diagramming a work relative to its square metre footprint. If we remember Koosha’s organisation of ‘SPLU’, there is a perceived correlation between the impact of an architectural work and its bigness. Here, there is some - a project occupying a lot of mental space because of its size. This is distorted by projects which take energy disproportionate with their small size, and large projects which by necessity receive proportionately less attention.

The net and the llama.

If the classic categorisations led us less than we hope, then a series of themes gathering projects together gives us a picture of the breadth of work. These diagrams have informed the organisation of this document and a broader understanding of the tactics used in practice.

The net diagram uses a cloud of projects and captures them in groups. These groups are not mutually exclusive; the nets overlap and get progressively bigger. The projects do however, tend to fall into one net more than others. Conversely but similarly, projects gather around a thematic anchor like sheep being led by a llama. Some gather more strongly to one, while others tend toward one but drift along with others. In a diagram driven by a search engine, its proportion is driven by use and popularity. In a tag cloud, the size or visual intensity of an element is determined by the number of times it is searched for. That visual element might be a word, or a thumbnail image. The user might determine the relative importance of a project and that user population might be the practice group, sharing a sense of what is relevant and useful. Or, it might serve to reinforce the already popular, and diminish the miscellaneous.

The tag cloud.

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Retroactive Prototypes.

A noise analogy, rather than a tribal allegiance, might be a more accurate reflection for the way in which space can best accommodate that noise and provide useful meaning for us, or in the language of the network, ‘proximity’. Treating these abstractions diagrammatically is an attempt to capture the breadth of project activity; to understand the whole body, including the miscellaneous, rather than make a few projects emblematic of the whole practice. This seems appropriate as a mode of practice where a group is running projects in parallel, and where each of those parallel activities is trying to hold on to the band of noise around them.

A noise analogy, rather than a tribal allegiance, might be a more accurate explanation of the influence of physically local design activity. The work close to us resonates most through its proximity; it is most visible in its own context, and that context is most similar and therefore most appropriate to our own. It is less purified by being remote and mediated. The tendency for a design narrative based on responses to environmental factors is for it to be abstracted toward an orthodoxy. Resisting that means that these ideas can only be loosely accommodated in architectural space. Equally and conversely, the architectural space can only loosely accommodate environmental narratives; they need to be given room to move and transform.

Two parallel questions follow from this discussion of noise: What practice environment can best accommodate that noise and provide useful meaning for us, or in the language of the network, ‘proximity’? What design tactics might best accommodate this noise in its architectural form? Part of the answer might be akin to accepting the weather, or the contingent nature of the process and the miscellaneous pieces that aren’t entirely expected or remembered. Rather than a well-catalogued library, the field of practice might be more like a shed; a space that accommodates the well ordered nuts and bolts; but equally the chaos, mess and junk.
As young graduate I designed a house in the country using a prefabricated, off-the-shelf shed. I did this not out of romantic attachments to sheds or rural buildings but out of a budget which didn’t allow for much else. It was intended as a temporary house — the ‘real’ one was to eventually supersede it. It turned out to be good enough to stay in, and became the only house built there. It is barely a house. Hi-line sheds offered a pre-designed range which had limited sizes, were made with conventional steel elements, and which were assembled on site. I selected the smallest footprint available, with 4.8 metre height, and the largest door available. I ordered two windows (the maximum size for the frame) and the largest two leaf slider available off the shelf, and cut this space for just over twelve thousand dollars. I bought one added window — the largest two leaf slider available off the shelf, and cut this to the steel wall. I did the same with translucent corrugated sheet. The steel cladding arrived packed in two matching red sheets, which were facsimilies of others were smaller, thinner, cheaper, less colourful. There was a lineage of raw modesty, of pragmatic modernity. I had generally been drawn to the crude or ugly things scattered through the history of modern art. Through Duchamp to Rauchenberg and Jean Dubuffet, and even to those Cubist collages which are so roughly made when seen in the flesh. I was attracted to the idea that ugliness might simply be a more difficult form of beauty. Simpler still, that if beauty is a restrictive concept, then ugliness can muscle in to expand that idea, or rather, rejecting the division altogether as an ossified concept might allow us to expand the notion of what can be beautiful.

Frank Gehry’s Califomian work (c1972-1987?) was one of my most important early architectural experiences.

1. Curtin University lecture 1991 with Hannah Lewi & Kate Hislop. The line references, William Gibson, ‘The Gernsback, and left as open space with a modernist design concept might allow us to expand the notion of what can be beautiful.'1 Our city was a town in economic recession. It had been discarded as rubbish after construction. We cut these up and made them into façade panels, composed in relation to the openings. The steel cladding arrived packed in two matching red sheets, which were facsimilies of others were smaller, thinner, cheaper, less colourful. There was a lineage of raw modesty, of pragmatic modernity. I had generally been drawn to the crude or ugly things scattered through the history of modern art. Through Duchamp to Rauchenberg and Jean Dubuffet, and even to those Cubist collages which are so roughly made when seen in the flesh. I was attracted to the idea that ugliness might simply be a more difficult form of beauty. Simpler still, that if beauty is a restrictive concept, then ugliness can muscle in to expand that idea, or rather, rejecting the division altogether as an ossified concept might allow us to expand the notion of what can be beautiful. Frank Gehry’s Califomian work (c1972-1987?) was one of my most important early architectural experiences.

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Frank Gehry’s Califomian work (c1972-1987?) was one of my most important early architectural experiences.
The Wagga Wagga Civic Centre

The Wagga Wagga Civic Centre competition was held in 1995. It was the last project I did before leaving for Melbourne — carried out with Stuart Harrison in a flurry of activity before leaving the West Coast. At that time questions about the impact of digital technology on architecture were ripe. We were asking: how would this be translated or modelled for speed of communication? This came to mind as a format made for speed of communication. This the Mies van der Rohe Foundation

Our tactic for the project had two parts - first, to envelop the Pavilion in an over-scaled reproduction of itself, and second, to treat that reproduction as an intensification of the original. We enlarged the Pavilion by a consistent factor and rotated it ninety degrees in plan so that it pushed out into the Pavilion's forecourt and placed it in a new setting. This of course is not unlike the Deutsche Werkbund interior of 1927, where the object with its own courtyard sat under a giant roof. The materiality of the new building was then intensified through saturation - as if you could take a building and photoshop the colour intensity of its surface, re-establishing a relationship where the new 'original' of 1986 seemed slightly small and slightly great.

When I finally visited the building, some years later, I walked into a small rear room, now a Barcelona Pavilion shop full of books on itself and its author. Playing in the background was Madonna’s ‘Like a Virgin’. Perhaps architectural rubbish is simply a way of seeing architecture through the lens of our immediate environment rather than from below the canonical plinth. This is what our cities are like - full of rawness.

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fig. 41: House with No Style: plan diagrams. Versions before and after de-styling:
A: ‘hejd-o-morf’ (John Hejduk Wall House, one of 40 designed 1967-73, one version built in Groningen, 2001)
B: ‘gehr-o-morph’ (Gehry’s Winton Guest House, Minnesota, 1987; sold and relocated to St Thomas University, 2009)
C: ‘corri-o-morph’ (Edmond and Corrin Newman-Iva house, Belgrade, 1936)

fig. 42, 43: 2J House exterior view

fig. 44: 2J house floor plan.

fig. 45, 46: 2J house (1992) interior

The bedroom loft mural is a resampling of the mural on Seidler’s Rose Seidler House (1948).
The results of architectural design (buildings) often last a long time. As they age, they can even acquire the sense of being permanent. This illusion of the permanent, timeless or eternal, is a confusion with permanent newness – an always present which moves with the designed artefact. Longevity should be viewed as the opposite of permanence or the timeless; instead it is a quality that marks the impact of time, and the transformations that time brings to it. Longevity is a quality that impacts on the use of resources; it forces us to think of what to do with the things we already have, and to consider the design process as projecting the use of resources into the distant future. Longevity is connected to old things, precious and durable objects; but it is also related to junk. Junk might come from ephemera, but its existence as junk suggests it has stayed around longer than expected, perhaps through re-use. Someone has failed to throw it away; someone else has found it; perhaps someone wants to extend its life. Longevity is a broadening of junk.

The architectural design process is not usually viewed in this way. My experience in the design practice of Denton Corker Marshall in Melbourne is an example. There I watched the design process carried out as though it was a moment to be frozen. The design moment generally appeared as an inspired sketch, and the process from then was about faithfully capturing that moment. Often the inspired sketch was captured in a model, then that model was captured in a set of construction documents, and those in turn were captured in a building. That process, however, was always approximate. The best one could hope for was to capture the sketch, but never to exceed it. The built outcome was almost certainly disappointing. The design moment is closed to noise, so the long and messy process of making architecture could never live up to the purity of the inspired moment; and the rich opportunities of that long and messy process are silenced.

My perception of design processes is that this is a common problem — architectural design is understood as a record of that moment, and the architectural object is generally referred back to that moment. Buildings are talked about in terms of their creation, rather than their current state of being, or their effects. A possible response to that, is to lengthen the conception of design – to stretch the process out, and include more of its life. Rather than see a design as a moment to be preserved or accurately translated, we might think of a longer process which continues on well after the architects have backed away from the process, and probably as beginning some time before they arrive. The job of the design might be to instigate a process which continues on and proliferates after the designer has departed. These were architectural questions I began to see as relevant to a number of architectural projects.
The practice structure of the newly formed Antarctica (with four others and myself) prompted a discussion about collaboration; asking questions about collaboration both as a practice environment and a design method.

In its very early stages, the agenda of the practice and its qualities were unclear and this suited us. Although even at this early stage, I was specifically interested in the concept of co-authorship. By this, I mean an intense co-authorship which, unlike a group structure, leads to the identity of the individual author being blurred or altered.

Art practice has the best examples. Picasso and Braque jointly inventing and reinventing Cubism, or Cindy Sherman’s self portraits (a virtual double); and especially, Gilbert and George. What is the relationship between a group and a co-author? What is the relationship between this, and the collaborative process of architecture?

Three projects at Antarctica started the conversation on collaboration. The East Darling Harbour design competition, Proposition 3016 at Broadmeadows, and Housing for Diversity in Perth. In each case the design process and its outcome is entangled by the fact of the group carrying out the projects. The physical environment for the projects became equivalent to a collaborating partner.

However, unless I convey my own role in a collaborative process, unless the liveliness and the bitterness of collaborative experiences is there, the result is deadness. That is what happened at the second GRC. For a time, and because of this, I set thoughts on questions of collaboration aside entirely.

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Fig. 50: Broadmeadows Proposition 3016, 2006. View of the site showing mixed scale insertions.

Fig. 51: Gilbert and George confronted the distracting problems of the author and collaboration; two people acting as one artist, making their own signature more complicated. Good manners and neat suits make them seem impersonal, detached and solemn artists, and, less revealing. Paradoxically they are actually bad stars, able to speak off the page directly, because they are there on it; putting themselves on the line, to talk about the big questions, of death, politics, race, religion, and seeing, around us. Gilbert and George, Here, 1987. Source: Gilbert and George, Tate catalogue, 2007, p118.

Fig. 52: Broadmeadows - plan view showing the small subdivisions (yellow) among the several larger build blocks.
East Darling Harbour project

The East Darling Harbour project was an open two stage international competition for the redesign of a site adjacent to the King Street Wharf in Sydney. It included the construction of around 500,000 square metres of built floor space, as well as large areas of public open space. The site is a reclaimed wharf created for loading docks and a passenger terminal for ferries. In contrast with Sydney’s highly varied harbour streets and finger wharfs, it stands out as nearly a kilometre of straight land edge. The project was launched in 2005, with its eventual winner being Sydney architect Phillip Thalis. Selected entrants (including Antarctica) were exhibited at the Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in 2006. To date the project has not been realised, though recent public debate has followed the awarding of the competition to West8, an American firm. We revisited the project in late 2008, with its eventual winner being Sydney architect Phillip Thalis. Selected entrants (including Antarctica) were exhibited at the Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in 2006. To date the project has not been realised, though recent public debate has followed the awarding of the competition to West8, an American firm. We revisited the project in late 2008, with its eventual winner being Sydney architect Phillip Thalis. Selected entrants (including Antarctica) were exhibited at the Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in 2006. To date the project has not been realised, though recent public debate has followed the awarding of the competition to West8, an American firm. We revisited the project in late 2008, with its eventual winner being Sydney architect Phillip Thalis. Selected entrants (including Antarctica) were exhibited at the Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in 2006. To date the project has not been realised, though recent public debate has followed the awarding of the competition to West8, an American firm. We revisited the project in late 2008, with its eventual winner being Sydney architect Phillip Thalis. Selected entrants (including Antarctica) were exhibited at the Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in 2006. To date the project has not been realised, though recent public debate has followed the awarding of the competition to West8, an American firm.

Broadmeadows: Proposition 3047 Project

Proposition 3047 was the first of an annual architectural ideas competition run by JRI Journal in Australia. Its subject was the civic precinct of Broadmeadows — a low density suburb and low socio-economic environment north of Melbourne. Nevertheless it is well located in relation to rail and the airport, and has been identified in government policy as an activity centre. It is currently dominated by a large suburban shopping centre and its adjacent car parking. The local government was looking to rejuvenate the area through both public buildings and small business opportunities, in the mould of incubators for innovative businesses. We revisited the project in late 2008 for the IABR Squat City competition: Antarctica collaborated with Melanie Dodd for the project.

We viewed the East Darling Harbour project as situated being somewhere between a market-driven master plan and an open-ended mega-structure. The central question was how to produce a singular framework which could be viably filled in by others — a three dimensional land sub-division, which nevertheless read as a coherent architectural gesture. That coherence seemed to be a necessary response to the powerfully monolithic form of the site — a rare piece of constructed, linear Sydney shore. The coherence of such a gesture would be tested over time — as it was inhabited and re-filled by a city. There was an analogy between this process and five of us at Antarctica, attempting to co-author a project for the first time. Finding a diagram to which each of us would put our names, and which would survive our ongoing design process, was necessary to move forward, was a test which needed to be robust. Conceiving of a diagram which would survive the “Sydney process” — with bureaucrats, developers and its eventual inhabitants all taking ownership of the spaces — was similarly challenging. It was here that we began to think of that diagram as infra-structure for the buildings.

The design for Broadmeadows’ Civic Precinct was a comparable situation within a different context. The situation was a flat suburban environment; the agenda, that it become more desirable to a wider range of new activity. It was an attempt to inscribe new business inhabitants into an activity district of big box retail and large car parks. In this case, the infra-structure was to be slowly filled in time. This would be done with an atomised land subdivision, making parcels small enough to be treated like suburban house lots. The tactic meant that these lots could be acquired by a broad base of owners and the land slowly accumulate buildings. It was a kind of start-up urbanism — the opposite of a master plan since it envisaged not an end point, but a starting point. It allowed and promoted accretion. The small parcels aimed to give a second scale to the environment of large, dispersed buildings and car parks — a second scale of ownership as well as of physical form. Like all start-ups, the desire to fill the site with new and vigorous enterprise isn’t always matched by the reality that follows. We intended to spread the risk, placing it in the hands of small and private operators, and as many designers as possible. We predicted that building wouldn’t happen immediately and in the meantime, the making out of the sites on the ground would provide places for temporary and informal operations. We planned no envelope or height limits — these were dictated by the small site, and the social conditions which would make them viable.

In a radically different context to East Darling Harbour, it asked the same questions. How does the fact of realising a project over a long time affect its form? How can collaborative strategies impact on the design process and extend that process into the length of its realisation and lifespan? The infrastructure present in each of these — in one case a ground level car park and in the other a concrete frame — requires a large cast of agents to complete them, to distribute the design process and keep it going after the infrastructure is done. The first design gesture is just one layer of several, hand-drawn over others for further layering.
Northbridge Project
An open competition entitled Housing for Diversity was launched in 2006 by the West Australian State Government. For the project, Antarctica collaborated with Diego Ramirez, John Doyle and Daniel Yusko. Located in inner urban Perth, the Northbridge site is vacant land where 19th century built fabric was demolished for the construction of a freeway link beneath it in 2003. The brief specifically targeted housing to replace the cheap boarding houses lost in the dispersal and gentrification of the area. The task was then to provide small dwellings of twenty square metres, and to begin the process of reconstituting the street. The competition was won by Perth firm CODA. This and our shortlisted entry were published in Architecture Australia in February 2006.

Mapping

Those three architectural projects formed a chronological series; their thematic comparisons were less conscious at the time but the subject of later reflection. The form of the public spaces created in these projects tend to be loose and open. I gave this type of space further consideration as I mapped past and current design work in preparation for the GRC process. This mapping exercise revealed a tendency toward the fixed program, except as space for a loose market that might operate at certain times. It is an excuse for an open space of some monumentality, of some robustness. Resuscitating an urban condition here involved handing over some empty space and waiting for it to be filled – and probably not immediately. As an entry it is overdrawn – excessive in relation to the building that holds it. It needs to be filled to make sense, and so needs more players, and more time.

Fig. 58: Grand Egyptian Museum project (Tout & Hansen) 2002: floor plan. The 400 metre square is only partially filled with program.

Designed in 2006 for a strip of Perth land denuded by freeway tunnel construction, the Housing for Diversity project aimed to replace disappearing cheap boarding houses in the Northbridge area. The focus of Antarctica’s design was the urban space outside the housing; the relief from the dwelling, that urban place on a good corner that might make living in the twenty square metre bedsit above it worthwhile. The tiny dwellings are arranged around a courtyard and also the street corner – but to make a big, open and loose space, they are pulled apart and lifted up over the corner. That place under the resulting large canopy has no fixed program, except as space for a loose market that might operate at certain times. It is an excuse for an open space of some monumentality, of some robustness. Resuscitating an urban condition here involved handing over some empty space and waiting for it to be filled – and probably not immediately. As an entry it is overdrawn – excessive in relation to the building that holds it. It needs to be filled to make sense, and so needs more players, and more time.

Fig. 59: Grand Egyptian Museum view of ground floor.

Fig. 60: Grand Egyptian Museum view of atrium.

Fig. 61 & 62: Canberra Public Place project (Crist & Harrison) 2003.

Fig. 63: Northbridge Housing Street Elevation.

Fig. 64: Northbridge Housing Ground and First Floor Plans.

Fig. 65: Northbridge Housing Plan.

Fig. 66: Canberra Public Place project (Crist & Harrison) 2003.

Fig. 67: Grand Egyptian Museum project (Tout & Hansen) 2002: floor plan. The 400 metre square is only partially filled with program.

Fig. 68: Grand Egyptian Museum project (Tout & Hansen) 2002: floor plan. The 400 metre square is only partially filled with program.

Fig. 69: Grand Egyptian Museum project (Tout & Hansen) 2002: floor plan. The 400 metre square is only partially filled with program.

Fig. 70: Grand Egyptian Museum project (Tout & Hansen) 2002: floor plan. The 400 metre square is only partially filled with program.

Fig. 71: Grand Egyptian Museum project (Tout & Hansen) 2002: floor plan. The 400 metre square is only partially filled with program.

Fig. 72: Grand Egyptian Museum project (Tout & Hansen) 2002: floor plan. The 400 metre square is only partially filled with program.
In Spring 2006 I distilled the thinking of the projects to find deeper themes in the chronological noise. This was done by visually mapping them - first laying down an edited chronology, then by further editing and sifting, looking for an overarching thematic finding, lulling, to find deeper themes in the findings of that first instance where the looseness of its space. That condition, that imagery and space, is manifest in the images. The finding of process foregrounded a split in scale between one building, the blank shed. The Grand Egyptian Museum is small but scale-less. It is a space needing to be over-scaled relative to or amplified that condition. In each case, scale contributed to its program, without expressing that condition. In each case, scale contributed to its program in order to remain loose-ended, its form is inert and robust. These are questions confronted in some earlier supervised student projects; that is, the robustness that comes from loosening the relationship between program, space, and its environment. The bifurcation is further generalised to longevity, and the ephemeral. To exaggerate longevity and to escape entirely on a trajectory through the permanent, neither end of the spectrum is satisfactory on its own. Solidified or evaporated, architecture can not fully account for the social, giving it neither a permanent locus nor agile responsiveness. The centre position between the two might be no more useful – the familiar ‘neither/nor’. The tension of the two ends is interesting; the ‘both/and’ position which embraces the ends rather than the middle. The mirrored face of George, looking both ways at once, marked that thought. In the centre of the overlaid map is the question: ‘Why is my head full of media images?’ (Paul McGoldrick) – a reminder for a child distracted by television and taught architecture through so many pictures. It is a reminder that this transformation, is one of the end game of this process, what is its logical extension? A dead end perhaps, a city of the dead. Architectural form left on its own, without social transformation, is moulded. Conversely, (Price 1934-2003, Rossi 1931-1997) equally offers us a lesson against modern functions with phenomenal malleability. Mapping form onto function only freeze it – it either is society being mobile, or it becomes burdensome as society moves on. Designing a society which has not yet arrived, for a contingent future, we can almost do without buildings. Extending that trajectory, we could let building evaporate: it no longer exists, only in the event of an experienced moment of momentary relevance. A cloud of anticipated vapour – like Diller and Scottsof’s Swiss Pavilion – is the caricature of the end which polar ends of a question about form in time, neither end of the spectrum is satisfactory on its own. Solidified or evaporated, architecture can not fully account for the social, giving it neither a permanent locus nor agile responsiveness. The centre position between the two might be no more useful – the familiar ‘neither/nor’. The tension of the two ends is interesting; the ‘both/and’ position which embraces the ends rather than the middle. The mirrored face of George, looking both ways at once, marked that thought. In the centre of the overlaid map is the question: ‘Why is my head full of media images?’ (Paul McGoldrick) – a reminder for a child distracted by television and taught architecture through so many pictures. It is a reminder that this remark relies on the exceptions. There are things on this map I can not account for, which are not part of the argument, yet are part of my mental space. They come from Strindberg, from Nietzsche, the things that are left to account for rather than discard.
For the Africa Centre, I worked on developing a space which would equally interact with any number of spatial possibilities. Thinking of its image in plan, it was one that might not easily interact with function. The perimeter enclosure could be thought of as a debris of surface and a gate, providing security and wind protection, and able to be lifted clear of the ‘ground’ plate. The institution might then be able to leak out at its edges, and contain a deeply enclosed space while also being exposed to an outdoor environment. I expected that this relationship shift with the environment would be adjusted over time, negotiated with the weather, with the openness of that space would accelerate the effects of that environment over time.

I first learnt lessons about the need to regard time as an element to negotiate (albeit at this stage only semi-consciously) while supervising the thesis project of Sophie Dyring. Her ‘Negotiated Civic Franchise’ project proposed a kind of public space which could be subjected to repeated process and brutal transformation while retaining a civic identity. Subverting Mies, the project argued that the Mesian indifference to particular situations made it well adapted to the most hiatus situations, or outer suburban community hall, for example. This resilience was demonstrated by re-franchising the design on several sites, and representing the building imagined after several years of rough treatment.

Dyring questions of longevity were subsequently examined in a series of architectural design studios conducted on the RMIT design studios on architecture at Pessac. She concluded, ‘You know its life that is always using and the architect who is wrong.’ 3 Architectural design is so often dependent on function as something akin to a crutch. Architectural design and negotiating with space. For example, this resilience was demonstrated by re-franchising the design on several sites, and representing the building imagined after several years of rough treatment.

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The result is an argument about the survival of architecture, Survival in the new territories of Dear Park against absence of civic buildings and high architecture. Survival as re-programming and de-programming of public facilities. The Berlin project is studied in context with riper and clartz, to demonstrate a built – proof formal gestures which might engender radical tapering. The point is made precisely by not only re-working the program and skin seven times under the same roof, but releasing the building five times, and drawing the building some years after construction, when Mies had had as much. Rodin’s glass, new paint, and new contrast – the black steel does not fade. Le Corbusier learnt lessons about the survival of architecture at Poissy. We conclude, ‘You know his life that is always right and the architect who is wrong.’


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from the immediate need, and more accommodating of any possible need. Students in these studios were eager to define the long life of designs in terms of long life program – searching for uses which demand this longevity – a seed bank for example, and a decommissioned nuclear power plant, or a radio telescope.

Even more disabling for design is the notion of an unpredictable future; of being unable to project forward, either to a perpetual present (if it will always be like it is now) or to the future as it is already collectively imagined (if it will be like science fiction).

The architectural results are either attempts at the timeless (the designer imagining history stopping at the moment of conception), or the futuristic (the designer imagining themselves present at a future moment).

Even the most sophisticated of these, Augustine Savage’s theatrical accretion of architectural elements washed up on the Yarra shore in a mythical Melbourne, collapses thousands of years of layers into a single design moment. Perhaps it is unreasonable to ask the designer to project what is ultimately the task of someone else, at a later point. It does in any case expose our problem with thinking of the ‘someone else’, and of ‘the later’.

The South African project is the first design work of this series which consciously treats the use of space over extended time as an element to be negotiated. It has grown from a re-selection of other projects in which such spatial concerns are present but dormant. Consideration of longevity in the design process has revealed that process from being an image of a captured moment. This means architectural form can participate in a process of degradation or change, rather than resist it.

Under examination in these projects is built space which is functionally inert without being spatially inert, suggestive of present use without being closed to future uses; sufficiently unfinished, robust and open to withstand and invite future change. Buildings generally have a very long life relative to their brief design process; longevity is taken for granted. Even when the life of a building is less than a thousand years, works of architecture cope with longevity without their original designer. If the design process accounts for this, or if it is considered as an architectural question, then it may re-orient the design process.

4. Gary Gutting, Michel Foucault’s Archaeology of Science, 1989

The design for the competition was carried out in 2006 for a brief with powerful aspirations for a site and content we had never visited. The project is for a new town of three thousand inhabitants in an agricultural region of 12,000 square metres as its key institution. The museum’s curatorial focus was on open communication and fluidly engineering participation. From the brief:

‘The site is on the South Side of the Eerste River (Southbank), within 450 hectares of land, on the Western Cape region of South Africa. Adjacent to the site on the North bank is the leisure infrastructure of the Spier Estate (1553-bed hotel, conference facilities, restaurants and retail outlets). The site, like the region as a whole, is part of a rich and sensitive ecological context. The competition called on architects and designers to define and apply new spatial approaches in order to create a community that will serve as a model for sustainable living elsewhere on the continent and beyond. At the core of the competition were universally relevant questions: in a globalising world, how can new spaces come into being that simultaneously acknowledge the creativity of its inhabitants, the abundance and fragility of its natural settings, and the dynamics of urban growth?’

Some argue that Africa does not need museums. The Africa Centre does not share this view. Africa and the world – the planet’s people, wherever they may live – the Centre believes, need a new kind of museum. Extraordinary though it has proven as a tool for the dissemination of culture, the museum such as it exists today fails in ways of seeing and interacting with art that presuppose a specific type of viewer. For this and other reasons, the traditional museum is often ill-adapted to certain art forms, notably ones of African origin.’

Longevity Conclusions

Thinking of the place of architecture in time, I prefer Foucault’s choice of words, ‘archaeology and monuments’ rather than ‘history and documents’. Where the latter imagines the big story and sees objects illustrating that story, the other sees the strange objects of the past and wonders what this might tell us about the present. Perhaps these are helpful in imagining the built environment from the perspective of the end of its life, rather than from its beginning. Perhaps then we might be able to imagine a user in the building, long after we are gone.

The South African project is the first design work of this series which consciously treats the use of space over extended time as an element to be negotiated. It has grown from a re-selection of other projects in which such spatial concerns are present but dormant. Consideration of longevity in the design process has revealed that process from being an image of a captured moment. This means architectural form can participate in a process of degradation or change, rather than resist it.

Under examination in these projects is built space which is functionally inert without being spatially inert, suggestive of present use without being closed to future uses; sufficiently unfinished, robust and open to withstand and invite future change. Buildings generally have a very long life relative to their brief design process; longevity is taken for granted. Even when the life of a building is less than a thousand years, works of architecture cope with longevity without their original designer. If the design process accounts for this, or if it is considered as an architectural question, then it may re-orient the design process.

The design for the competition was carried out in 2006 for a brief with powerful aspirations for a site and content we had never visited. The project is for a new town of three thousand inhabitants in an agricultural region of 12,000 square metres as its key institution. The museum’s curatorial focus was on open communication and fluidly engineering participation. From the brief:

‘The site is on the South side of the Eerste River (Southbank), within 450 hectares of land, on the Western Cape region of South Africa. Adjacent to the site on the North bank is the leisure infrastructure of the Spier Estate (1553-bed hotel, conference facilities, restaurants and retail outlets). The site, like the region as a whole, is part of a rich and sensitive ecological context. The competition called on architects and designers to define and apply new spatial approaches in order to create a community that will serve as a model for sustainable living elsewhere on the continent and beyond. At the core of the competition were universally relevant questions: in a globalising world, how can new spaces come into being that simultaneously acknowledge the creativity of its inhabitants, the abundance and fragility of its natural settings, and the dynamics of urban growth?’

Some argue that Africa does not need museums. The Africa Centre does not share this view. Africa and the world – the planet’s people, wherever they may live – the Centre believes, need a new kind of museum. Extraordinary though it has proven as a tool for the dissemination of culture, the museum such as it exists today fails in ways of seeing and interacting with art that presuppose a specific type of viewer. For this and other reasons, the traditional museum is often ill-adapted to certain art forms, notably ones of African origin.’
Fig. 78 (above and opposite): Southbank, South Africa; views of the Africa Centre from north and west.

Fig. 79: Southbank; aerial view of the Africa Centre.
Fig. 80: Southbank Town site plan; composition in strips:

Fig. 81: The Africa Centre floor plan
Accretion is a consequence of longevity. As time acts on a building it is subjected to events which layer upon it, one after the other. The architectural design process is part of that larger process. The residue of its actions remain when it is transformed or partially dissolved. Viewed together, a body of design work is not dissimilar. As a new project is added to the pile of others, it perhaps re-illuminates the previous ones, perhaps building a consistent conclusion, perhaps not. The image of this is neither neatly linear nor a random collection, but a series of adjustments and reactions which partly blend, and partly remain separate. Similarly, the design process embodies an accretion of ideas; one laying on top of the other; the process being an assembly and rearrangement of its layers. It is a super-compressed version of the long process that buildings undergo, so compressed that it can appear singular or momentary, or natural. We take it for granted that cities are built of layers — of the ideas of many people, each superseding one another, or cohabiting in a shared space. The perfectly planned city is an illusion of a timeless moment — a pure-idea which transcends the contingencies of urban life. The architectural design process and its outcomes are no different. To think of them as cleanly sequential, consistent or representative requires us to burn away many of the useful layers. This is the experience of our architectural projects. The projects described in terms of longevity infer accretion. Or rather, they expect it and invite that accretion. This is what prevents them from seeming timeless, preserved in an unchanging ether. The big, or uncompleted version of the long process that buildings undergo, so compressed that it can appear singular or momentary, or natural.

Architectural questions related to the house are muddled into questions of the home. Most of the copious discussion of luxury tailored dwellings lies in fields outside architecture, while general housing (that is, most housing) is often regarded as sub-architectural by the architectural profession. Architectural experiments of form through the house often suppress the influence of inhabitation, and the realities of their influence over time. This is even more complicated when it is one's own house, and when the building is neither spectacular nor highly wrought, and when its design process is slow and interrupted. This building is a slow accretion; sometimes a haphazard one, and one which spans most of my time in Melbourne. It was begun ten years ago and has been slowly added to since. Apart from housing a series of discarded and unfinished ideas about architecture, it houses my family (which has doubled in size) and myself. It became the office for a business partner and myself for three years. Design and construction commenced in 1997 and 1998 respectively.

It is the daily rub of the market at the front door; at the Africa Centre, a set of events not fully catered for, with a set of spaces not fully programmed.

Samuel Beckett  Worstward Ho, 1984

The Caretaker's House

The Caretaker's House in South Melbourne is a building for my partner and myself. Design and construction commenced in 1997 and 1998 respectively.

Town planning zoning determined that the new building become an office with a caretaker’s residence. This replaced a small wooden cottage in what was now an industrial zone. The building shell of two levels and 85 square metre footprint was built for around $600 per square metre. While under construction, the design was presented at the Half Time Club in Melbourne. It was published in an issue of Architect Victoria in 2001 dedicated to low cost design, and again in The Age newspaper in 2004. We moved into the building the day before the birth of our first child. Between 1999 and 2002 it housed the offices of Harrison and Crist. In late 2017, after the immediate built context had changed significantly, work began on a third level addition, adding more space named as ‘office storage’ for town planning zoning purposes. It then was published as part of series of projects for the Re:Housing exhibition and book, and again was featured in The Age/ Sydney Morning Herald Sunday Life magazine in 2008.

Caretaker's House Project

Architectural questions related to the house are muddled into questions of the home. Most of the copious discussion of luxury tailored dwellings lies in fields outside architecture, while general housing (that is, most housing) is often regarded as sub-architectural by the architectural profession. Architectural experiments of form through the house often suppress the influence of inhabitation, and the realities of their influence over time. This is even more complicated when it is one's own house, and when the building is neither spectacular nor highly wrought, and when its design process is slow and interrupted. This building is a slow accretion; sometimes a haphazard one, and one which spans most of my time in Melbourne. It was begun ten years ago and has been slowly added to since. Apart from housing a series of discarded and unfinished ideas about architecture, it houses my family (which has doubled in size) and myself. It became the office for a business partner and myself for three years. Design and construction commenced in 1997 and 1998 respectively. Construction commenced in 1997 and 1998 respectively. This replaced a small wooden cottage in what was now an industrial zone. The building shell of two levels and 85 square metre footprint was built for around $600 per square metre. While under construction, the design was presented at the Half Time Club in Melbourne. It was published in an issue of Architect Victoria in 2001 dedicated to low cost design, and again in The Age newspaper in 2004. We moved into the building the day before the birth of our first child. Between 1999 and 2002 it housed the offices of Harrison and Crist. In late 2017, after the immediate built context had changed significantly, work began on a third level addition, adding more space named as ‘office storage’ for town planning zoning purposes. It then was published as part of series of projects for the Re:Housing exhibition and book, and again was featured in The Age/ Sydney Morning Herald Sunday Life magazine in 2008.
my practice and part of my practice. As a piece of research it is like carrying out an experiment on myself; seeing the results immediately and re-test- ing. As a slow accrual, it is a common thread behind other projects which stretch back well before my arrival in Melbourne. It contains my own half disclosed preferences, while I spend time designing houses for others.

This work was the first whole building I designed in Victoria – a small house in South Melbourne, begun while I was concurrently working on the Mel- bourne Pleaseum. At the time, I noted that its site would fit over five hun- dred times into the Museum’s floor area.

We bought the timber cottage in 1996. It was near collapse – one of four in a row, and one of few of a type left after the area’s transition to an industrial zoning. A brick mechanics’ workshop flanked the other side of the row; behind it were more warehouses. An important agenda was to do what the buildings around us did. That is, to be part of the real context, not the preferred context – looking at the immediate environment as it is, and agreeing to its validity. One of the first decisions was to set the front wall of the building flush with the warehouse adjacent, and at a matching height. This was a continuation of the warehouse wall, which in itself had no particular merit.

Since the design had aspirations to be general housing – it needed to be considered as repeatable rather than unique; applicable to a field which is now referred to as sustainable and affordable. This building had precedents in my first house attempts – in a lineage of pragmatic brick buildings which are lean and undecorated. A house I had designed in the Northern suburbs of Perth (the Wall House) – blunt and raw, was in reaction to all the eclectic are lean and undecorated. A house I had designed in the Northern suburbs in my

First Thoughts about the Caretaker’s House

Immediate Environment

Project Noise: the determining environment

Density & Money

From the beginning of the design process, the project was closely tied to my practice and part of my practice. As a piece of research it is like carrying out an experiment on myself; seeing the results immediately and re-testing. As a slow accrual, it is a common thread behind other projects which stretch back well before my arrival in Melbourne. It contains my own half disclosed preferences, while I spend time designing houses for others. This work was the first whole building I designed in Victoria – a small house in South Melbourne, begun while I was concurrently working on the Melbourne Pleaseum. At the time, I noted that its site would fit over five hundred times into the Museum’s floor area.

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The ideas I experience there are so layered that they were impersonal, they are only partially a record of a design. Yet they were not neutral, or diluted - they were intensified and polished through erosion. They gathered strength as the control loosened. It is more common to see the opposite in the design process. I had seen the weakness of a process where construction becomes the end point, in fact the end point comes well before then. I had seen it on the Melbourne Museum. A sketch becomes a model - a model becomes a building - imperfection is so. As an attempt to record a design moment, the building can only be as good as the day it is photographed, and that will never be as good as the drawn idea, a shadow on the wall. It is the problem I was trying to reverse in thinking about longevity.
brutally simple; a box envelope and limited openings; few finishes and internal divisions; conventional load bearing construction with no steel. We eventually built the shell for around $600 per square metre. We, we worked with the sorts of spaces and materials that we could see in every bit of streetscape on the block. Not so much objective as non-judgemental, these were an unfurled flatsheet view of the immediate built context, presented without exceptions. The new building simply formed part of this strip — its relationship interfacing with neatness so that, in part, the immediate neighbours regulated its composition. The parapet is set to the

The home not a house

Three external and prosaic influences nearly derailed the design. First, the town planning application was refused on the basis that it was a house and the land was now zoned industrial. Second, the geotechnical engineer claimed the site was virtually impossible to build on due to the very poor soil and the proximity of unstable buildings. Third, same difficulties of the small project and a revised housing market meant proscribing a builder had a number of false starts. The latter two influences were invisible in impact (apart from very deep footings below ground and some very poor building work). The first influencing fact (that of town planning) meant the design was turned into an office building holding a caretaker’s residence. Almost no spatial change was needed following the nominal change in use (a bathroom became disabled accessible). This interested and amused us — and confirmed our view about the absence of specific planned use.

One of the first moves was to think about figuring a footprint onto the site – squeezing space into the small piece of land and possibly trying to sculpt a form in the box of land. We began some basic tests by pressing shapes and carving out voids; resisting the orthogonality of the site. We used a tree at the front of the site as an excuse for a void. We split the form to and carving out voids; resisting the orthogonality of the site. We used a tree at the front of the site as an excuse for a void. We split the form to

Context panoramas

The particular context of the building is a fast changing fragment of the city. When I first viewed it, the gigantic Crown Casino complex had just been completed, while the more immediate surrounding was low rise, low key, and industrial. The area has altered scale since then and now includes key, and industrial. The area has altered scale since then and now includes

The series

For the purposes of general or broader application, the Caretaker’s House is part of a series. In terms of my study of small houses, the Caretaker’s House is the mid-point of that series. Drawing directly from it’s Perth precedent (2), the Watt House, the Flat House, and the Where House; the Caretaker’s House influenced others after it: the 2002 House, the Kwon House, the Adaptable House, Dandenong Living Places Housing, and the Patch House. (fig. 96)

The territory of the Retractive Prototypes (fig. 98) series made far the Retractive exhibition was the repeatable nature of the immediate house, the tension between the tailored one-off house and the generic volume housing. With its small footprint, the Caretaker’s House was at one end of this series. Being made in its plan figure, it was at one end of a spectrum ranging from generic to idiosyncratic.

By placing the house in a series several times, I sought to address the situation where the individual house is viewed as a personal expression

You don’t necessarily learn anything from my books...I want absolutely neutral material. My pictures are not that interesting, nor the subject matter. They are simply straight forward 'facts'.

fig. 94: Site catalogue for the Caretaker’s House, Melbourne, 2006.


Fig. 97: Site catalogues for 2002 House St Leonards Victoria, 2002

2002 house St Leonards west face 2006
rather than as architecture with a public dimension. That dimension is perhaps acquired gradually, by repetition, by serialising, and by collective accretion. Likewise, with its D-I-Y builder, the project slowly accrues layer after layer of material. Placed in a line, it adds a layer to the knowledge of the house, and offers an antidote to the instant house, whether unique or identical.

The Shadow Cabinet Project

The Shadow Cabinet is the antithesis of a decade long process of accretion, with layers being slowly added over that time. It accretes ideas rapidly, laying one onto another in quick succession. The piece was partly the summation of a practice (Harrison and Crist), and partly the first project executed at the commencement of this reflective process. It is small and contained, having a short design process and a short built life in a gallery. It is evidence, however, of the tendency in my research to layer a set of ideas through the design process, and to let them cohabit in a space. In the Shadow Cabinet, all the noise of the design process is compressed into one simple little box.

With a notional brief for an object nominally represented at one third scale, in an exhibition nominally at full scale, we were drawn to the experienced scale of small spaces instigated by that ambiguity. In plan, the pavilion replicates the Australian Standard disabled access bathroom template at full size. It is half the height of generic 2700mm high office space, and the ceiling is mirrored to double the section. At one third scale it would be a comfortable, albeit small chamber. As a cramped room it is like a cupboard, evoking the Narnia fantasies, or the shrunken world of Alice’s Wonderland. The mundane world of building codes began to rub up against literature. As a pod, it conjured up for us old fashioned science fiction; the mysterious black monolith of 2001: A Space Odyssey, HAL; the tardis for Doctor Who, or the sensuous interior for Barbarella.

Its name referred to the decision-making core of political parties in opposition; a meeting room for a group where policy is formed and then sits, waiting for the day when that opposition governs. All these thoughts folded into the design process along the way and all were allowed to stay; nothing was discarded. Some said that there were too many ideas. Sometimes such a cacophany of ideas spells difficulty. It threatens to simultaneously overwhelm and undermine the design intent. But this work is not building, it will not accrete through inhabitation; its lifespan mentally and in the public realm was short.

Shadow Cabinet

The Shadow Cabinet project was designed and built in August and September 2005. It was part of a group exhibition entitled Pavilions for a New Architecture held at the Monash University Museum of Modern Art. The project was carried out in collaboration with Stuart Harrison, immediately after the practice of Harrison and Crist had formally disbanded, and also with RMIT students Nicola Garrod, Meg White and Prue Lawrence. It was built in a garage in suburban Brighton before being assembled in the gallery. It was then sold to a private buyer who intended to reconstruct it some years later. To our knowledge he is yet to do so.
The Warburton Trail Bridge Project was designed over an intensive period in the summer of early 2007. The process of designing it demonstrates more clearly than most ideas unfolding in an accretive manner. This process allowed for a series of separate moves to occur, and for participation by a number of people. On reflection, the clarity of this process may be due to the contained period of its execution, and to the contained (though diverse) group of people involved. The project to design a bridge over a highway on the Eastern route out of Melbourne was at a threshold between the sprawling metropolis and rural valleys beyond. Apart from creating a pedestrian and equestrian link over the road, it would rejoin a severed part of the Warburton Trail. This section of the Trail had once been a railway line. Two earlier bridges had previously occupied the site, where the Trail was cut by the Maroondah Highway, interrupting this popular riding and walking trail. [Fig. 103]

As part of an invited (but slightly mismanaged) competition shortlisting process, we had a very short time in which to produce initial concepts. We produced two images over the course of one night and established that we had very little idea of what the design should be about, beyond two things. One, that as a night-time gateway into metropolitan Melbourne (it marks a vague transition from the Dandenong hills into the suburbs) that the bridge should shimmer under its own lighting. Second, that as a rejoiner it could amplify the landscape condition at each end, defined by the copse of trees from which it sprang. Our brief and superficial view of the site showed that its density was quite different at each side – that is, a dense copse of trees on one side of the Highway and on the other a more open trail with sparse trees. The density or opacity of the bridge might amplify this. The project then lay dormant at Vicroads for several months before we were notified that it had been shortlisted. At this stage, we revisited old conceptual territory and reconfirmed our view that the bridge should be a response to its immediate location and that it might contain interior space. That is, that it could be like a building with an interior rather than merely a sculpture, and its form, a response to the site. We quickly discarded sketches of sculptural snaked bridges and spectacular arches. We had no answer to the question of containing space and temporarily set it aside. [Fig. 104: First concept sketches for the site.]

We reckoned that if the bridge was to be a seamless join in the track, then its ground surface should be a continuation of that track – a tray of ground continuing it rather than a machine stretching over it. Further, we decided that the seamless join required a bend. We set the bridge’s centre – meaning that it could be read as a continuation from each side (rather than an object of its own) and would create a stopping point over the road. The bend could occur in section too – absorbing some necessary height changes and elevating the stopping point in the middle. Prior to resolving the form of the bridge, we set and fixed its line a rise and a bend – defined by the site and limited by the requirements of horses crossing it. In contrast to the continuous line, the impulse that the object should be two things meeting was driven by the same response as the bend in the line, and of them sprouting from the unlike edges we

A bend and a rise in the road

Fig. 101: (opposite) Warburton Trail Bridge; view looking north across the Highway

Fig. 102: Cedric Price & Frank Newby, Snowdon Aviary, London Zoo, 1963

Fig. 103: Warburton Trail Bridge former rail bridges on the site.

Fig. 104: First concept sketches for the site.

Fig. 105: (opposite) Warburton Trail Bridge; view looking north across the highway.
Joining Two Parts

A large bridge often has an interior, even if it is left uncovered. Being in the interior of the Sydney Harbour Bridge is like being inside an extraordinary nave. We were conscious in the Warbucks project though, that the scale of a large structure like the Harbour Bridge is a large part of this effect, and that was not available to us in this instance. We looked at more modest rail bridges which enclosed a tunnel of space in mid-air.

The Ponte Vecchio was an obvious ‘room’ since it had an internal program. Here, a framework was made which held up the flow of people crossing. The two sides were differentiated simply by colour and therefore inferred some enclosure. However, we still hadn’t confronted the scale of their dilation. We imagined these spaces as provoking a sense of enclosure, and therefore inferred some enclosure. However, we still hadn’t confronted this effect, and that was not available to us in this instance. We looked at more modest rail bridges which enclosed a tunnel of space in mid-air.

The London Zoo — literally a loose structure moving and enveloping a landscape beneath it. It seemed a far less complex sculptural piece than cable structures such as Frei Otto’s. So the skin on our bridge ballooned out, beyond the structure, making the space on the bridge like a room at each end, and to form a loose enclosing structure. We thought about Cedric Price’s bird enclosure at the Australian Pavilion, Venice Biennial.

Many designs have a catalogue of ideas, and a kit of built elements. In this case, that catalogue accreted in a way which is evidenced in the designed form, just as landscape would, just as its decomposition was inevitable and may mean its partial replacement and transformation.

Enclosed space and the tent

The Ponte Vecchio was an obvious ‘room’ since it had a program. Here, a level of enclosure was required — a balustrade to two metres for horse riders. But this was not a ‘room’ and would not provide the substance of a visible ‘gateway’. We were attempting to design a ‘room’ without program, without monumental scale, and because of safety concerns, without a complete or dark enclosure. We wrestled with fabric, and the room became more like a tent. If we were to achieve a ‘room’ then the space would need to enclose a broader space, that is, be less of a tube. We thought more about the desire to merge with the landscape at each end, and to form a loose enclosing structure. We thought about Cedric Price’s bird enclosure at the London Zoo — literally a loose structure moving and enveloping a landscape beneath it. It seemed a far less complex sculptural piece than cable structures such as Frei Otto’s. So the skin on our bridge ballooned out, beyond the structure, making the space on the bridge like a room at each end, and to form a loose enclosing structure. We thought about Cedric Price’s bird enclosure at the Australian Pavilion, Venice Biennial.

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Long-life & the ephemeral

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The accretion process

Team Three

Strategically, we were aware of being one of three designs competing and the outsider of those. In another strangely mismanaged event, the third team was met together with the client to caution their project. This triangle helped position us. We expected of Sean Godsell’s attempt and minimal approach; he had cited a log thrown across the creek as an inspiration. We predicted the second team’s (Cassandra Parmenter) response would be more ornamental and sculptural. Our skin could be in the middle — a ‘both’ and, or ‘neither’ position — neither minimal nor highly ornamental, both decorative and plainly robust, site specific and without an individual’s signature. In reality, we were indifferent to the dictum — equally interested in the poles but wishing to sidestep the idea that the two be viewed as opposite answers to the same question. We simply wished to ask different questions.
Fig. 111: Warburton Trail Bridge; form study model

Fig. 112: Warburton Trail Bridge; lateral section series

Fig. 113: Warburton Trail Bridge; view from the highway.

Fig. 114: Warburton Trail Bridge; sequence moving through the bridge interior.
similar aims were pursued in the design of the Lakes Entrance bridge, carried out immediately after the Warburton trial project. How can the bridge best be experienced as a public space – as an arrival location and navigable rather than simply a means of transport from one side to the other? This bridge was the replacement of a well-like timber structure. We considered open source software and wondered about its role in architecture. Open source software is a reaction to the tight hold on products by proprietary software companies, which prevents both access to the products and innovation in their development. Open source shares code and encourages development incrementally by others. Several others have used the term open source architecture to describe two different approaches. One was to use the digital connotations of the term to foreground an interest in digital coding and processes. The other was to think of architectural services as a shared resource for those in need - a kind of pro bono cooperative. Instead, I wondered if open source architecture could relate to a broad focus on information sharing, above and beyond the margins of the profession. It could make over the adoption of the work of others, and privilege the benefits of broad dissemination over uniqueness. It positions ideas more clearly as a form of open access.

At the same time, I was discussing a growing pile of projects, gathering them into this pit. I found it difficult to stop adding to the pile. It was a problem for focus and a problem for completion. But it also signaled an interest in layering up information, and in moving into the next thing before returning to the first. It was suggested that the sheer number of projects was the most difficult part of the research, but also that they did not operate in isolationystematically. I noticed that I had identified this form of accretion as central to the way of making the projects.

Starting from Nothing & Starting with Everything
Sheds for Antarctica

As the addition’s area burst out of its ready-made enclosure, we entered the territory of the annex – the lean-to supplementary to the main hall. The asymmetrical gabled shed deserved some recognition, and we were grafting onto it separately on three sides. A series of layers were added to that shed with a range of straightforward strategies to maintain the dominance of the large hall and to appropriate it. To the East the gable end was stripped and made transparent; and re-clad in clear glass. The annex that jutted out was a shed, which replicated the gable at a smaller scale. It enveloped a couple of rooms and a back service stair, and created a side entrance. The additions on the North might be described as a not-so-gentle pull or stretch of the gable – extending a street portal over the new pool and bending the geometry in the process.

Inside this building the weather is stifling – the air is close and humid and heavy with chlorine. It is noisy. The buildings which enclose that air are imperfect – rough and variable in their composition, all compromised by previous architectural shortsights. The chief tactic was to treat the visual language like the weather – to use that as a gauge to set the levels of the next stage; to graft onto this building rather than stand next to it, and to do so without degrading that older imperfect work. The graft was not a seamless, invisible replication but like a new piece of skin, slightly more smooth and pink than the rest, nevertheless joined and forming part of the same surface. When adding to a free work of architecture, the hazards are similar but reversed; navigating the tension between uncritical respect and insensitive destruction. In architecture, the hazards are similar but reversed; navigating the tension between replicating uncritically and dismissing blindly. The precise task at hand seemed to be navigating a graft in a shady space between these two poles.

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Bairnsdale Project

We were in a similar situation in Bairnsdale, grafting onto a civic building of dubious quality; grossly dilating it and retaining almost all of it. Completely burying its fabric seemed to be no more an option than replacing it. Nor did extending it in a manner compatible with the original. Much of the additional building volume came from a disproporionately large car park, and the encircling of the old building was partially a response to its siting near the centre of the site and away from the street. The game of “exquisite corpse” we played with the existing library building. The civic of the addition emerged. Grafting onto a side and forwards onto the street corner...
Fig. 127: Knox Leisureworks Pool addition, interior during construction, 2010

Fig. 128: Bairnsdale, view of the entry to the library, offices and visitors’ centre.

Fig. 129: Bairnsdale, Lateral Section.

Fig. 130: Bairnsdale, Floor Plan, upper level.

Fig. 131: Bairnsdale, Street Elevation.
delivered a more prominent public presence, which was consistent with the broader range of programs. The hollowing out of the central interior helped join those programs spatially, but also helped realise the atrium implied by the existing, strange barrel vault. The gently distorted edges are a new version of the cranked and chamfered geometries rife in the original building.

Architectural works do not acquire longevity without accretion, except in the preserved environment of pure architecture or pure research. That environment assumes no change, yet the evidence is that this is uncommon. Accretion happens of its own accord in the built environment. I have tested it through the slow building process; through collaboration, and through serialisation and contextual compression. And from a certain point in this research, a conscious consideration of future amendment or unlike additions to the design entered at the time of its creation. These projects are evidence of accretion which results not simply in a picturesque melange, or as an expression of instant complexity. Temporal accretion is possibly a useful antidote those impulses to over-represent complexity where, the focus is on complexity built slowly through social and environmental change.
Fig. 133, 134: Knox Leisureworks Pool Addition, Section and East Elevation
Participation

Why examine the length and age of the design process? Why think in terms of its many layers and include its junk? Might it be primarily in order for architectural design to become more participatory? Participation is an abused word in design; as misused and problematic as collaboration, or sustainability. Yet, they are difficult terms to ignore. Participation is often seen as a sub-culture of design; but I would prefer to view it as a part of the general design culture of architecture, and to ask what it could mean in different contexts. The previous thematic discussions, of the role of time or that of noise together add up to this; a desire to participate in the context surrounding the design process, and to view the design process as an opportunity to participate in it. Participatory design processes usually seek to engage those who are disenfranchised from their built environment, yet are most directly affected by that environment. The history of modern housing is the most acute example. Architecture has been shown to become irrelevant when its design values ignore the lived realities of its inhabitants. Those marginalised from the architectural process are in this position for the simple reason that they unable to fund the building. Participatory design seeks to highlight the user rather than the patron. Where does the architect and design process fit into this? How does it best contribute? For many, participation means community consultation, and that often means token efforts to inform user groups and to hear feedback. It is a process well known to local governments in this country. Advocating a participatory process, however, is often coupled with a suspicion of formalism, and of narrowly defined professionalism. It has grown from a mistrust of paternalistic or uninterested professionals. Because this mistrust is often combined with an observation of a profession focused on sculpting exclusive delights, this position can descend into a suspicion of architectural form generally, and of professional expertise more broadly. Conversely, the complaint sometimes heard is that participation in the design process amounts to asking citizens to do the design themselves. Bluntly put, the disenfranchised are asked to contribute their own design services, while others have the luxury of professional architectural services provided to them. The problems of participation outlined by critiques of architectural modernism often stem from an architect in a powerful position applying a set of values which are out of touch with their context. The visionary is confused with the autocrat. In a participatory process conflicting these models, the architect is no less in charge; but the role is recast as a well meaning facilitator, one of managing and overseeing a community’s design aspirations, and applying a filter of good taste over the activities of said community.

I am reminded of OMA’s `mixture of omnipotence and impotence’. For an architect so dominant these words seem hollow, yet they remain relevant. The mix of omnipotence and impotence can vary radically for less revered architects. In many instances, the designer is not the

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2. for example Jeremy Till (2009), Codes of Misconduct, p179
3. OMA, Koolhaas & Mau, 1995, p.xix
Learning about participation from partial projects

Some projects are complete and cohesive; the relationship between an early idea and the final outcome is clear and tight; the design process supports the realisation of an idea comprehensively. Most projects are not like this; the mix of omnipotence and impotence is rich, emanating from the noise of all those around them.

Some projects seem to be the very opposite of complete — where the design process is so dependent on aspects beyond control that the architect seems only partially effective. In a spectrum from autonomy to participation, perhaps the theoretical house projects of Eisenman (for example) are at one end, and the mix of public work of emergency architects for an active user group at the other. In one, the architectural design process is pure and central, in the other the architect is a partial contributor, in danger of avoiding design questions altogether. Our architectural projects with a high level of control and a dense contribution of needs. For the architect as contributor rather than manager, the user is not disenfranchised through lack of access to participation, perhaps the theoretical house projects of Eisenman were the very opposite of that. It was elaborated as a mixture of convenience as found elements, and by exposing the workings of the building whenever possible. In the second stage, more structure was added, and more building taken out. Columns were taken out and an open workshop, theatre space, DJ booth and bar box were added at the rear of the building. Concrete steel beams were smashed into the structure already there (which had been built without the intention of being exposed).

The process lurched forward, breaking after each stage. The next stage, though, was the main one — three times the size of the previous two. The upper level was planned as a flexible, flat floored theatre with an adjoining gallery and backstage spaces. Late in the construction of the gallery, a roof volume was exposed, and an extra function room was added. Variety was exposed, and an extra function room was added. Decisions, including design decisions, were taken liaising with Reach, and a manager liaising with industry to procure donated trades and materials. Decisions, including design decisions, were taken jointly, and in the context of resources as they became available.

The design tactics had to be brutally simple to survive this environment. They had to be simple and navigable and based on limited formal means. The phrase ‘Reach Raw’ had gained currency, and became a term for its current or any planned use. We added structure as we pulled out and in doing so discovered that the building had an inadequate structure already there (which had been built without the intention of being exposed). There was never enough time to be properly briefed, and never enough money or time to build properly — birth was always a drip feed. During the slow building process, the organisation grew fast and expectations did too; yet priorities lay in places other than building; money was used to sustain education and people came and went. People were coming or moving up. Design decisions were made on the fly, documents were minimal, work was staged and updated. It took the architect and other participants some time to get used to this, and it took Reach time to get used to an architect. Once everyone learned a way of working, things went better.

We began by refitting offices into the lower floor of a warehouse shell, and in doing so discovered that the building had an inadequate structure for its current or any planned use. We added structure as we pulled out the interior, and put back as little as possible. We defined a relationship between a ‘raw’ image for the youth programs (expressed mostly as raw emotion) and a ‘raw’ image for its built headquarters. That was elaborated as a mixture of convenience as found elements, and by exposing the workings of the building whenever possible. In the second stage, more structure was added, and more building taken out. Columns were taken out and an open workshop, theatre space, DJ booth and bar box were added at the rear of the building. Concrete steel beams were smashed into the structure already there (which had been built without the intention of being exposed).
The Strawbale project at Merrijig commenced in 2001, with construction starting much later. The project involved the development of a house and farm buildings for a pair of families opting into a rural lifestyle. It is a slow and loose project. Its aim was a small ecological footprint, with autonomous services and no grid connection. Here, the primary design concern was to recognize the limitations and potential of strawbale construction. Recognising its tendency to veer toward adventurism in image, we sought to bring this self-built field into direct contact with questions of composition in the architectural canon.

Strawbale is an extremely loose and imprecise form of construction (it is ‘levelled’ with a hedge trimmer), and so it resists the precision of the architectural designer. As a very thick wall (here 500mm), it resists the taught planar skin we might expect a sandstone with smoothness. It also resists the orthogonal. The resulting plan maps these observations, into compositional interests in space, as well as strict axial symmetry and grid. It is a very massive block, that is in opposition to the grid and the grid’s very different and public context. A temporary building with a life of a few months over the Summer of 2008, it was intended to demonstrate the prefabricated system of super lightweight framing and strawbale infill for buildings that are subsequently re-used and recycled. In addition, the temporary events and business housed within served as a demonstration of sustainable food principles in an urban café environment.

Unlike conventional strawbale construction, the folded steel skeleton was exposed, as was its strawbale finish, with each bale in a steel polythene wrapping, and the steel frame supporting a lightweight roll out glazing. The primary materials of plywood and steel are re-usable and recyclable. The strawbales, if not re-used, returned to the land as compost. A wall and roof system of hung planting is contained in commercial florists’ trays and Chep crates. Planned essentially as a single flat wall form, planted roof deck, the project was envisaged for a planned open site in the City of Melbourne. It made its way instead (and fortuitously) into a wedge of space between two pavilions at Federation Square.

The Strawbale House and Farm is in a small eucalypt forest, three hours’ drive from Melbourne. Its site includes alpine forest and former farm paddocks. It is a commission by two families – to build a farm producing olive oil, as well as a bakery, and in doing so to engage in a series of ecological strategies for both. A lifestyle. It is a slow and loose project. Its aim was a small ecological footprint, with autonomous services and no grid connection. Here, the primary design concern was to recognize the limitations and potential of strawbale construction. Recognising its tendency to veer toward adventurism in image, we sought to bring this self-built field into direct contact with questions of composition in the architectural canon.

Strawbale Farm Project Merrijig

Merrijig

The Strawbale House and Farm is near Merrijig, a town at the foot of Mount Buller, three hours’ drive from Melbourne. Its site includes alpine forest and former farm paddocks. It is a commission by two families – to build a farm producing olive oil, as well as a bakery, and in doing so to engage in a series of ecological strategies for both. A lifestyle. It is a slow and loose project. Its aim was a small ecological footprint, with autonomous services and no grid connection. Here, the primary design concern was to recognize the limitations and potential of strawbale construction. Recognising its tendency to veer toward adventurism in image, we sought to bring this self-built field into direct contact with questions of composition in the architectural canon.

Design work began on this project in late 2000, within the practice of Harrison and Criag. The owners moved to the site and lived there, and in doing so engaged in a series of ecological strategies for both. A lifestyle. It is a slow and loose project. Its aim was a small ecological footprint, with autonomous services and no grid connection. Here, the primary design concern was to recognize the limitations and potential of strawbale construction. Recognising its tendency to veer toward adventurism in image, we sought to bring this self-built field into direct contact with questions of composition in the architectural canon.

Greenhouse Federation Square

The Greenhouse Federation Square was a temporary building on the plaza of Federation Square, operating as a bar in late 2008. It was built as a demonstration of techniques for lightweight, recyclable construction, and urban agriculture. Aggressively promoted by its owner Toofo Baik, the design was a super-fast collaboration between the owner, the architect, and urban agribusiness (exon Construction) and engineers (Tim Glinton & Associates). In January 2009 the building was carefully deconstructed (as planned) and packaged for another life elsewhere, initially in Perth. Publication of the work has ranged from Architectural Design Research and Architecture Review Australia, to Vague Living, to The Mombo Project, to Green建筑，to and to thousands of other places.


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Greenhouse Federation Square

The Greenhouse project in Federation Square became a follow up project to previous private strawbale house (fig.141), and a test case for lightweight systems. Here, this time in a radically different and public context. A temporary building with a life of a few months over the Summer of 2008, it was intended to demonstrate the prefabricated system of super lightweight framing and strawbale infill for buildings that are subsequently re-used and recycled. In addition, the temporary events and business housed within served as a demonstration of sustainable food principles in an urban café environment.

fig. 142, 143: Greenhouse at Federation Square, Melbourne: interstitial spaces between the two buildings.

fig. 144: Greenhouse at Federation Square, Melbourne. Floor plan showing interrelation into the plaza stair space between two buildings.
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**Fig. 145:** Strawbale House, Merrijig Victoria. 2000 conceptual image of operation on Le Corbusier’s Ronchamp chapel.

**Fig. 146:** Strawbale House, framing construction.

**Fig. 147:** Strawbale House, interior during construction.

**Fig. 148, 149:** Strawbale House, informal inhabitation during construction.

**Fig. 150 & 151:** Views from the North and West partially complete.

**Fig. 152:** Strawbale House, Merrijig Victoria. Floor Plan bifurcated for two couples sharing the space.

**Fig. 153:** Strawbale House, Merrijig Victoria. Section.

**Fig. 154 & 155:** The building’s weather: Strawbale House in snow, and during 2006 bushfires.
Participation & Resilience: Hubs, Clinics & Workspaces

Richard Koshy & Tony Maksym

...the case, for example, of Council House Two in Melbourne, the consultant
architect's process forced broader participation at concept stage; a process
which seems analogous to how a sustainable community would best
operate. This view holds that conventionally separated roles for disciplines
or consultants inhibit the innovation needed for green design; that the
process is necessarily complicated and requires robust collaboration. In the
case of the Greenhouse project, roles and processes were complicated and
altered by the building program and the needs of stakeholders. The fast
track process forced each party to be a collaborator. The design process was
less than six weeks; and so the construction process, design development,
costing, and permits, all happened concurrently. The construction period
was less than eight weeks; key structural considerations took place on the
construction site. A co-design role between architect, builder, engineer
and owner became essential. There were several financial investors in
the project, including the building contractors and an events promotion
company. The lines between promoting a facility that was only to be open
for a few months, promoting a construction system as a prototype, and
developing a piece of site specific architectural design, became extremely
blurred.

The contribution of architectural design was masked by these processes.
The speed of the work made it seem to “just appear”. The spatial mapping,
central to our concern as designers and critical in the particular nature of the
site, was masked by the apparently self evident and “off the shelf” character
of the designed object. A role for the architect as sole leader or manager
was impossible here. Participation in all the noise and the speed of the
process was absolutely necessary. The complexity and mess of the process
created enough difficulties to distract everyone, yet the situation threw
into sharp focus the particular contribution of the design discipline to the
building process. The reality of authorship in architecture is usually more complicated than is
conventionally described and in a participatory process this can become even
more complicated. However, this does not mean that in entering the muddle,
the architect does not bring the particular expertise of the discipline. In
a project where owner, builder and designer are enmeshed, clairvoyant around the
design contribution is even more critical. It is not uncommon, for example, to
watch architects in an uncontested role of manager of the process conceding
the role their spatial intelligence might bring. Participating in a broader,
spatially complicated process alters the design role but does not diminish it.

...Some of Antarctica’s design projects bleed particularly into advocacy for
design in the built environment, bringing design values to a context in
making the medical process both safer and more comfortable. It was
expected or intended. There, the presence of a design process cannot be
imagined it split into other uses or other future arrangements.

The Workplace of the Future project for Victorian State Government
focused on the efficiency of office facility footprints and on
administrative strategies for integrating new technologies into work
environments. It was driven, by and large, by a facilities management
perspective. An outcome of that agenda, however, was the proposition of
flexible short term office hubs for government – an idea impossible to
accept without a design process. Similarly the Rebirth of the Clinic
project examined primary care medicine, initially from the perspective of
professional safety (motivated by the professional college after a series of attacks on general practitioners in their clinics). An examination
of this as a spatial design problem was pursued through design case
studies, and broadened to examine the role spatial design could play in
making the medical process both safer and more comfortable. It was
further expanded to consider the role of architectural design in general
medicine, and to consider the civic role of the clinic building in delivering
both health and shared information. This is not an obvious approach to
a professional culture largely divorced from architectural design. It took
some innovative questioning from the College of General Practitioners to
challenge the scepticism of many doctors (as well as that of the Institute
of Architects). An argument for the place of design needed to be made
beyond its conception as ornament or luxury indulgence. A third project,
the Sustainable and Affordable Housing Initiative, (SAHI) was focused
on design from its inception. Yet its explicit aims – to deliver low cost
single houses with high environmental standards – meant entering a field
largely abandoned by architects many years ago. Spatial design might
have been peripheral to the design questions of these projects (which
largely focused on design as defined by efficient building servicing
techniques, or by façade composition), had they not been actively
pursued by the design team. One of the key contributions to the SAHI
projects was to integrate forms of spatial adaptability into the plan,
thereby addressing questions of social longevity in housing. For these
projects, like the others, the form of participation was to join another
field, and bring a design process to it, rather than to manage the design
contributions of others. It meant bringing architectural design to the
table as one of several participants.

The results of these design processes have something in common with
each of the earlier projects cited, and with the discussions of longevity
and accretion. They share an impetus to divorce buildings from their
immediate functions, with the purpose of making them resilient. In
office hubs, tightly programmed work spaces (work stations) are
substituted with looser spaces for working and meeting with varied
users. When the medical clinic is uncoupled from its rigid type, it can
edge toward other public types such as libraries, cafés or community
centres, rather than being imprisoned by its own medical program
or defined as a small hospital. Even for the nuclear family house, we
imagined it split into other uses or other future arrangements.
Resilience is a stated principle of the workplace guidelines project. It is a quality that gives space longevity, allows change, and accommodates the unknown. Resilience is what allows a built form to exist beyond an immediate functional situation without being dependent on formal archetypes.

Resilience is a stated objective of another project, the VEIL design for the EBD site in West Melbourne. (fig.160) Resilience in this case meant adapting cities to life beyond fossil fuels; beyond enormous dependence on large scale mobility and transport. Spatial design was one part of this - a mere participant. But for us it implied lessening the influence of zoning on the site, as well as any other pre-figured separation of program. The spatial resilience of an urban design might be measured by its ability to loosely contain new programs, and to co-locate existing ones. In that situation, the effect of an increase in density would be accelerated by a decrease in commuting, relocation, and rebuilding. Resilient architectural design means neither neutral, fluid space for flexibility (assuming constant change), nor an immovable type into which varied programs are pressed. It wrestles (or negotiates) between the two, just as longevity wrestles between resisting time, and responding to it. All architectural space does this, more or less, and fully acknowledging as much in the design process, means accepting form which is imperfect or provisional. It also precipitates a consideration of ongoing and future participation in the architectural process.

Uncoupling functional program from architectural space is a way of catering for future participation in the design process; of acknowledging that designed spaces will be acted on, that others will continue the design process over time; and that accretion infers participation.

The experience of our practice is that notions of participation and resilience are demonstrated most strongly where the role of design, and its process, is least obvious. This might be most marked in projects where the noise is greatest, or when at face value it is not a design project at all. The analogy for participation is one of sitting at the table of others, instead of bringing others to our own table.
Conclusion

Design practice is an ongoing activity, in my case through Antarctica and the RMIT Architecture Program. The process of uncovering design propositions has structured a research environment and has led through six GRC project presentations. This PhD charts a path through that research and uncovers five basic propositions that are the deep questions underlying this ongoing research. They have been labeled Noise, Junk, Longevity, Accretion, and Participation.

Through these propositions I have attempted to connect three things which I argue inform and interact with each other throughout the architectural design process, and that are often analogous to each other.

They are:

1> A type of architectural space (A SHED)

A shed here is defined with the following characteristics:

a: a loose relationship between program and form—between its interior and exterior envelope
b: an envelope which is simple without being minimal
c: raw enough to accept accretion

2> A mode of practice (ANTARCTICA)

Which has the following characteristics:

a: a group practice (a place not a single personality)
b: a conventionalised exterior (engage with ‘normal’ practice)
c: participation is key, both within the group and within the wider environment of the projects

3> An ethical position towards architecture (SUSTAINABILITY)

Which has the following characteristics:

a: to broaden and expand the field of architectural design
b: to accept the condition of the built environment as we find it
c: to be resource conscious, seeing architecture and building as a finite commodity

d: Program and form are often very loosely related. A shed is a formalisation of this phenomenon. It accommodates indeterminate activity; and changes over time. This should be differentiated from a shed defined through a nostalgic for honest expression. It is closer to Venturi and Scott-Brown’s notion of the decorated shed (which accommodates program and ornament) without their singular focus on the sign replacing space. The focus on questions of time amplifies the capacity of architectural space to accommodate loosely defined requirements.

b: Questions of formal complexity, precision or craft are largely sidestepped here. Thinking of design as a process unfolding over time releases the work from being a formal expression of a moment or a particular time, whether expressed through complexity or through minimal precision. Instead of being preoccupied with the purity of form (either complex or minimal), a shed aims to be permissive. That is, architectural design can accommodate complexity better than it can create it; it can allow it better than it can prevent it.

c: Simple and flexible spaces are not necessarily sheds. It is shorthand for a characteristic that accepts and demands accretion. Rawness means sufficiently un-finished or un-precious, so that it may accept the unpredictable inputs of others and therefore extend the design process into the life of a building. The projects in this document have in different ways demonstrated this characteristic. Reflection on the earliest projects under the theme of Junk were particularly concerned with this idea. The overarching formal quality of the shed could be described via the ability to survive and adapt to social or cultural change; to modernity. Its form is robust enough to be altered, re-coloured, neglected or degraded, without foregoing its architectural ideas.

Architectural design is intertwined with the environment in which it is made, including the environment inside the architectural office. When we established a loose group practice at Antarctica we observed two common models and aimed to cut across both. First, the personality driven practice, with a dominant head reigning for a generation; second, an anonymous corporate structure including the environment inside the architectural of.

With the exception of Antarctica’s earliest days, when a loose cooperative structure was instilled, a conventional company structure has been pursued. That structure has incrementally become more straightforward, and tighter, while being mindful of its autonomous origins. We have been conscious that normalising a structure via external protocols has enabled us to participate more broadly in the public architectural environment.

d: Participation is the crucial ingredient of this practice environment, preventing it from ossifying, and allowing it to supersede this reflection. The developing practice environment of Antarctica relies on our ability to draw on a shared library, rather than subscription to a single shared agenda. It relies on a culture of review and critique, rather than of pre-approval or an explicit singular direction. This takes time, both in the day to day and through the accretion of

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the shared library. Questions of co-authorship, collaboration and specialisation in the design process are filtered through participation. The messiness of practice contingencies and competing agenda remain central to the design process. Acknowledging the existence of a complicated set of roles and allowing them to participate is necessary to properly understand that process. I have also observed that the collaborative design tactics used in projects frequently parallel the external pressures of the environment. Accommodating architectural program with form is like accommodating varied voices within a group; the collaboration necessary with clients, consultants and builders mirrors the internal negotiations of a design group, as well as the constraints of a physical site. A multi-headed design structure has made us more able to accommodate the particular difficulties of a given project.

The ongoing design research aims to broaden the field of influence and engagement for architectural design. Reflections on the theme of Noise in particular have considered the design process within an expansive terrain. Similarly, reflection on time through Longevity and Accretion aims to expand further still the territory in which architectural design enquiry can comfortably exist. Engaging in design in which resources are a real concern, or where the direct influence of the designer is more limited, are examples of that process. The projects have demonstrated this position through the diversity of participation in the imperfect conditions for design.

Accepting all of the built environment and its artefacts is a response to the agenda of participation. It is an ethical position to refuse to dismiss most of what surrounds us. The theme of Junk describes engagement with degraded forms of building and information; the themes of Longevity and Accretion expand this to join the ephemeral to the durable. Positioning architecture as a finite resource is latent in themes extracted from the projects described in this document. It unites the impulse to re-use junk, to stretch the life of buildings, and to encourage their re-adaption through accretion. This position endures the intelligent use of space, just as it endures the intelligent use of money, and of the human resources used in making the designs. Each project discussed here shows evidence of engaging with questions of resources. The term sustainability is inadequate to describe this position toward architectural design. However, I use it to shift the sustainability debate away from questions of landscape or wilderness, or of building science. Instead, it is framed by the long term viability of architectural design in an overpopulated and under-resourced environment. I began this document with a proposition about the camel; asserting my preference for it over the more commonly admired horse, and asking what does that architectural camel look like? The projects demonstrate that it can take many forms, but that in contrast to predominant images of modernity, it might look old, or small, or cheap or unfinished, or very much like its own surrounding environment. Yet it has a form which cannot be ignored.
This PhD contributes to a body of knowledge about design practice that commenced in 1989 with the involvement in RMIT’s Design Practice Research Lab, of Howard Koolhaas, Alan Powell, Peter Elliott, Nonda Katsalidis, Alex Selenitsch, Michael Fudge, and Ian McDougall, and which has since included over sixty practitioners from Australia, South East Asia and Europe. That body of knowledge exists in a significant design community which forms the environment for the work of the PhD.

This PhD is distinguished by its engagement with loose forms of collaboration in design practice. It has extracted some implications for architectural form and for forms of practice which arise from this engagement. The projects are evidence of architectural form developing in a collaborative environment. The thematic structures have identified some key questions posed by those projects. As part of a body of knowledge that focuses on design practice, the themes that have surfaced here are common to many practice environments. Contending with multiple and incompatible influences on the design process, and the messiness of collaboration are just some of these. This work has examined the potential for such themes to be central to thinking about architectural design in practice, rather than as a repressed impediment to it.

The themes drawn from the projects have aimed to bridge the gap between some of those practice realities, and design as it is often described, insulated from those realities. The projects have addressed the impossibility of architectural composition existing in a pure environment, while recognising architectural form as the primary way of communicating architectural ideas.

This research contributes a framing of the discipline through ambivalence toward its boundaries. On one hand it is open to issues outside design culture; on the other it asserts the value of the spatial intelligence particular to architecture. Rather than viewing the conventional tasks of architecture as constraining, it is designer culture narrowly defined design process. The aim of pursuing this argument is to bring the spatial intelligence of architecture to bear on a broader range of situations.

The propositions of this work navigate space between a series of issues that form against architectural thinking about architectural design. A binary of formalist aesthetic positions versus the ethical anti-formal contribution of architecture.

Using philosophical terms, an idealist asserts the autonomy of architectural form, and its generation while an empiricist verifies that form against the observable. The pragmatist, occupying a third pole, is not so much constrained by reality’s impurity, but open to the possibilities of contingent influences. This research claims to be in that third territory. The danger of aestheticising the shed in its various definitions remains present. Conscious of Koolhaas’ attachment to canonical modernism, of the attachment in Venturi and Scott Brown’s decorated shed to historically derived ornament, this research seeks to open – ended aspect of their arguments. The shed as a rustic vernacular or as a form of functional purity are similarly aesthetic attachments.

The terms of noise and junk used here are useful. As contingent categories, they are of little use without the discussions that delimit them. Recycling or reappraising lifts objects out of the junk category, just as cultural goods can return to that category, depending on their relevance. For noise the question of distinguishing useful meaning is one of more subtle and specific tuning to an environment. In either case, these notions resist a fixed aesthetic.

There is scope for greater interrogation of notions of impurity, and of how design culture is constituted as valuable (as opposed to noise or junk) through operations of media, of professionalism, or of patronage. For the practitioner, these projects begin to address these dilemmas through architectural design.

Questions of judgement and rigour are weighted against the potential for uncritical acceptance of the environment. The implication of these propositions is not that the design process and its environment remain free of critique. Rather, the whole environment may be subject to judgement rather than blind dismissal. Further, the design process may then be subject to a wider range of appraisal, taking in a wider range of considerations over a longer time frame.

For an educator such a reframing of the design process might release the student from the sometimes painful experience of the studio – one that is narrow, individualised and momentary. Collaboration in the many forms described here might paradoxically make the complexity of design process more approachable and sharpen critical judgement.

The research carried out in the discipline through design practice might similarly benefit from the frank admission of its realities and a widening of its environmental focus.
Fig. 166: RMIT Building 8 viewed from Antarctica's studio, Melbourne 2008