ARK: A PROVISIONAL COMPOSITIONAL TAXONOMY
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PRELUDE

This book presents a formal analysis of the work of Ark. It is a companion to *Ark: Pursuing Qualities of Relation* where the research abstract and introduction frames this research.

Early written reflections on the work gave rise to a sense that aspects of the work were repeating project after project. An analysis of the work began with the aim of articulating what those aspects were. The means of analysis involved the construction of a compositional taxonomy consisting of diagrams, photographs and text. The taxonomy examined five design outcomes that were felt to best represent what the practice was striving to achieve at the time. The projects were the Albany house (2009), Ecotech (2009), Langs Bach (2012), Haast Street (2013) and the Lab at the fifth Auckland Art Triennial (2013). The taxonomy revealed that particular compositional tendencies inhabited the body of work. They consisted of a set of parts and qualities of relation between the parts. These tendencies became keys to articulating the research, to understanding the underlying issues Ark as a practice was grappling with and the field in which it was located. Through examining my own practice, through locating and differentiating it in this way, I have generated insights about architectural composition in more general terms.

Both volumes of this document are to be read alongside the viewing of the video recording titled *Ark: pursuing qualities of relation through a provisional compositional taxonomy*. The video is the third of three components that are integral to the Appropriate Durable Record (ADR) of this doctoral research. It serves as a record of the public exhibition of Ark’s work that ran at the RMIT design Hub between the 20th and 26th of October 2014. It also serves as a record of the examination, and of the presentation to the examiners of the research that took place on the 23rd of October 2014.

The exhibition consisted of four components: An orange carpet that defined the space of operation; a backdrop assembled from the pages of this book set in a grid of 19 columns by 6 rows of printed paper; a black plinth with a copy of both printed volumes of the ADR; and set against this was what might be termed an ‘idea model’ but which I called a ‘vessel’. The vessel was an ensemble of seven pieces, each of which contained certain models, drawings, materials, tools and other evidence of a making practice. It allowed me to enact a process of composition in front of the examiners as a means to demonstrate how a set of primary compositional parts were latent within the provisional vessel, and how they are being made and remade through an attention to certain qualities of relation.

The parts – the diagrammatic volume, constructed space, articulated plane, mannered skin, operative backdrop, and variable – the relations between them – tension, provisionality and poise – and how they appear in each of the five projects is described in the pages that follow.
A SITUATED TAXONOMY

This chapter locates the idea of taxonomy in architecture and examines the nature and potential of taxonomy as an architectural device. It is particularly concerned with taxonomies that address architectural composition and follows a specific interest in how architectural composition as a practice is understood and promoted through the use of taxonomy. Along these lines, the discussion presents a by no means comprehensive, but carefully selected group of key historical and contemporary examples. Their discussion allows the taxonomy produced as part of this doctoral research to be considered and situated in a broader context.

Taxonomy (from the Greek τάξις meaning arrangement or division and νομία meaning method) is the science or technique of classification. ‘A taxonomy’ is the descriptor given to a single scheme of classification. They may take various forms: As lists of names determined by disciplinary specific naming protocols; as annotated diagrams; as matrices; as successive written passages, or otherwise. An architectural taxonomy is likely to consist of a combination of text, diagrams, drawings or photographs.

Three modes of operation might be distinguished in the use of taxonomy. First, they serve the function of explaining how things fit with, and relate to, other things. Taxonomies place entities in relation to one another to the effect of simultaneously establishing a base for comparison between them, and arguments for their belonging together or otherwise. They reveal characteristics of entities through making differences between them evident. Meanwhile, relationships between entities are implied through their location in the scheme relative to one another (and) according to the categories the taxonomy sets up.

Secondly, in the search for accurate and comprehensive coverage, taxonomies have historically produced knowledge by propelling searches for items to occupy the categories created by the taxonomists. “In theory, the development of a good taxonomy takes into account the importance of separating elements of a group (taxon) into subgroups (taxa) that are mutually exclusive, unambiguous, and taken together, include all possibilities.”

Schemas by Le Corbusier, Christopher Alexander, and Rob Krier, as well as more recent cases by FOA and Reiser Unemoto are presented below to illustrate the use of taxonomy in architecture. Together, they demonstrate a third productive mode of operation in that they all suggest that new architecture or new understandings of architecture did, or should emerge from employing the chosen taxonomy. Driving the discussion of this collection is the question of what each taxonomy implies about how architectural composition is understood in the work it communicates.


Le Corbusier, Alexander and Krier represent important yet disparate historical fields of architectural thought and style: Le Corbusier as a key figure of the modern movement, Alexander as a post-modern counterpoint who advocated for the re-empowerment of 'self-builders' as part of a wave of criticism of the moderns, Krier as a neo-classicist. But while each stands as a main protagonist in a very different area, all used taxonomy to communicate 'authoritative' messages of what architecture is or must be. FOA and Reiser Umemoto are presented here as representatives of 'late' modernism. Where their use of taxonomy differs to the other three is that they call it into play to analytically describe existing bodies of work rather than to expound and project universal principles.

Le Corbusier

In texts that he authored, Le Corbusier presented a great many of his architectural schemes in the form of diagrams. The sketched components of a diagram are often arranged so as to establish comparisons between them. The idea that each represents, or the criteria by which they are included, might be noted alongside, or included in a concise caption. These can be read as small systems of classification or micro-taxonomies made to articulate particular ideas (figure 5.1).

Every now and then there is evidence of Le Corbusier using his diagrams reflectively. The drawing opposite—a “carefully weighed reflection on architecture”—is a case in point. This and their hand-drawn quality peak a sense that he developed ideas through his practice of making diagrams. In this way he demonstrated a particular understanding of the act of composition. But there is a schism between the nature of diagrams and the tone of the text they are often taken to support. Ideas made and encapsulated in the diagrams are accompanied by texts that turn them from being the nuanced outcomes of a personal practice into models for others to follow. One effect of this shift is to detract from the importance of the activity of composition that brought the ‘models’ into being and by which they might be tested and advanced.

The impression these diagram/text combinations leave is of a highly rational, systematic approach to design. While not a taxonomy, The Modulor (“a harmonious measure to the human scale universally applicable to architecture and mechanics”) plays this impression out (figure 5.2). It is a method of determining scale and proportion for things that are yet to exist and stands as an outcome of Le Corbusier’s quest for generally applicable models or rules through which aspects of architecture might be prescribed.

Christopher Alexander

At the outset of *The timeless way of building*, Christopher Alexander articulates (in a round-about way) “the quality without a name.” He sets the search for this quality as the principal motivation for endeavours in architecture and planning. In the terms set out in this research, it is a compositional quality that resides in relations between things.

In an earlier report titled *A pattern language which generates multi-service centers* he writes “Every designer knows that the most important feature of any form is covariation among relationships. As we make minor changes in one relationship, other relationships have to change along with it.” His idea of design, then, might be seen to align with the idea of the ‘design project ecology’ presented in volume one of this document. However, the understanding of composition he unfolds concerns assemblages of generic, spatialised, programmatic elements finding specific form in relation to one another in response to particular ‘problems’ inherent in the project.

The report demonstrates the use of a “proto-type design” — a generic model — in the design of community facilities he calls “multi-service centers”. It can be read as a taxonomy that sets in order what Alexander and his co-authors determine to be a collection of repeating problems in, and proposed solutions for this particular architectural programme. Each one of these problems/solution ensembles is termed a “pattern”. An individual pattern “… expresses a generally valid principle, which can be used over and over again. This is the essential point of the patterns: they are re-usable.” With each project, the intention is that a set of patterns be assembled to define a sort of space of possibilities from which the design is to be extracted.

The multi-service center proto-type consists of 64 patterns classified in terms of the type and scale of problem they address. It is summarised in a cascade diagram (figure 5.3).

Published eight years later, A pattern language\textsuperscript{11} shows an expanded ambition for the approach. Pitched as a tool to empower non-architects (principally ‘self-builders’), it is a system intended to address a multitude of everyday design issues from towns to buildings to construction through a collection of 253 patterns (figure 5.4-5.5).

Alexander issues provisos about the use of the pattern language and he acknowledges the limitations of the use of generic models in design. He cautions, for instance, over the reading of the cascade diagram in the multi-service centres report: “…it is not intended that a person use this cascade as a flow chart during the actual design process.”\textsuperscript{12} Nevertheless, it is a description of the design process that the language leads to and it is difficult not to read it in precisely the manner he warns against.

Despite Alexander’s qualifications, the pattern language has been criticised for reasons that include its closed-ness as a system and its formulaic nature.\textsuperscript{13} It doesn’t specify ‘rules’ for composition directly but does set up strong predispositions based on (now) historical, everyday precedents and typologies. While he claims his pattern language can generate an infinite variety of designs, the possibility space it effectively defines is narrow.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure5.5}
\caption{Pattern 235-253 in C. Alexander et al. (1977) A pattern language. New York: Oxford University Press}
\end{figure}


\textsuperscript{12} Christopher Alexander, Sara Ishikawa, Murray Silverstein \textit{A pattern language which generates multi-service centers} (Berkeley: Center for Environmental Structure, 1968), 51.

Rob Krier

Rob Krier is an architect and educator who is best described as a neo-classicist. In his book *Architectural Composition* he examines a raft of architectural works. Many are historically renowned, some are drawn from the ‘everyday’. Through them he illustrates a scheme of architectural composition that traces architectural forms back to their constituent platonic elements.

In a chapter titled “On architectonic form”, he writes: “As soon as an architectonic system takes on physical form, point, line and plane patterns take effect on the inner and outer surfaces of the system. What do we mean by that?

- Walls, floors and ceilings are planes.
- Window cross-bars and mortar joints are line structures.
- Lamps, installation fittings, holes, etc. make up point patterns, as do many other architectural elements.”

He continues: “Space, solid, plane, line and point obey the rules of spatial composition. They can be artistically distorted or manipulated. Without wishing to elaborate at this point why this or that distortion technique is employed, I should first like to introduce you to the rules and then, with the aid of examples, uncover the causality of the processes. An element can be:

a. bent
b. divided
c. segmented
d. added to
e. superimposed, intertwined
f. perspectively distorted
g. deformed

This is essentially a catalogue of objects and their manipulations in space. Krier illustrates this overview of composition with a taxonomy (a “Matrix of connections and dependencies of decisions in the design process” – figure 5.6) that sets these aspects of architecture in relation to one another.
It is followed by nine other, carefully laid out, graphically compelling taxonomies all titled "Elements for sculptural and plastic spatial composition and their transformations" in which the basic elements and transformations are demonstrated through (mostly drawn) examples (figure 5.7).

Taken together, Krier’s ten taxonomies make a systematic series that very clearly explains a particular understanding of architectural composition. Others concerned with architectural education demonstrate similar understandings in similar ways. They include Francis Ching with Architecture: Form, Space & Order17 and Jonathan Friedman’s Creation in space: fundamentals of architecture.18 All share a tendency to demonstrate generalised compositional principles through diagrams that break compositional outcomes down into their basic components. When this type of formal analysis lays the identified elements out in a taxonomy it implies that formal synthesis is a matter of reversing the analysis, a process of reassembling unchanging, primary parts.

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18 Jonathan Friedman, Creation in space: fundamentals of architecture (Iowa: Kendall/Hunt, 1989).
Foreign Office Architects

Phylogenesis: FOA’s Ark\(^{19}\) is an expanded taxonomy that reflects upon a body of architectural design work – 37 projects are examined in 657 pages through a combination of text, diagram, orthographic drawing, renders and/or photographs. The final page is a fold out ‘map’ that provides an overview of the scheme and the forms it classifies (figure 5.8). It invites investment by the reader in the pages that precede it.

This taxonomy is a design project in itself that earnestly casts a system of classification over the projects in terms of the performance of the principle form-defining surface of each. The classification system is taken seriously to the point of providing names for the projects based on scientific / phylogenetic naming protocols. Ultimately Phylogenesis, punctuated by the map, achieves a demonstration of the evolution of each project from a common source to a distinct formal species.

It is a tidy, concise way to understand the work of a practice in retrospect. But there is also a clever sense of architectural irony and perhaps humour embedded within it. Zaera and Moussavi are well aware of the association of taxonomy with prescriptive systems of design. They push the method as far as they can but introduce the outcome clearly as being only one way to understand their work. They warn against taking this way of understanding their work in reflection to be an explanation of how the work actually comes about. There is also a sense of recognition that it may only be useful in the moment at which it was produced and sense of caution in terms of both its on-going agency in their practice, and as a model of self-reflective practice for others.

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\(^{19}\) Foreign Office Architects, Alejandro Zaera, Farshid Moussavi, Institute of Contemporary Arts, Phylogenesis: FOA’s Ark (Barcelona: Actar, 2003).
Reiser Umemoto

With their Atlas of Novel Tectonics, Reiser Umemoto articulate their own open, evolving formal agenda through carefully annotated, assembled or drawn diagrams (figure 5.9). They capture a sense of a reflective process that probes and subsequently acknowledges the limitations of the multitude of ideas they are dealing with. Yet this body of architectural ‘tectonics’ remains open ended. Through a range of operations including articulating “a systemacity” within certain projects that might commonly be held to be ‘closed’ such as Mies’ universalism or by bringing simple ideas into relation with one another, they establish a formal agenda with direction but without predetermination. They view typology (the classification of formal types) not as a restriction but as a repository of source material: “Typology is not only useful as a form of classifying something at the end of a process but also as a crude device for use in design process. This requires a reevaluation of each type within a range of flexibility and transformative possibilities.”

The influence of D’Arcy Thompsons’ On Growth and Form, which gets a mention in the introduction to the Atlas, might be seen to lie in the background to this interest in the translation of formal types.

Some of the ideas articulated in their Atlas bear likeness to those articulated through this research. Their “exchanges among systems” resemble Ark’s “parts in ensemble relationships”. They also use the terms “tension” and “poise”, and note the relation between them. They write: “A state of poise is not an average or a mean in the Aristotelian sense, and while operating in a state of poise may incorporate extremes, it does not seek equilibrium through weakening of excess or deficiency. Rather, it seeks a dynamic tension between them.” Ark’s taxonomy runs with similar ideas of tension and poise, and adds provisionality as another to the mix. However, with Ark they aren’t only ways to talk about the taxonomy but become part of the taxonomy itself in a way that effects a slightly different understanding of composition in architecture.
Implications for Ark

The exemplars discussed all explain ideas by identifying their constituent elements and laying out them out so they are held apart yet in proximity to one another. The demonstration of ideas thus effected tends to be systematic, objective, ‘logical’ or even ‘factual’. Corbusier, Alexander, and Krier use these qualities to assist their arguments as to the universality of their respective approaches to architectural composition. On the other hand, FOA and Reiser Umemoto use their taxonomies to reflect on their own work in a way that shows composition to be specific to a particular practice manner. This stands in contrast to an understanding of composition as the application of a generalised set of rules. Ark’s taxonomy has an affinity for those of FOA and Reiser Umemoto in this respect.

All five case studies place emphasis on distinguishing between elements rather than their involvement with one another. Instead of being discussed, relations between elements are often only implied through their (relative) placement in the scheme. Such is the nature of taxonomy. But in the context of research that involves reflecting on Ark’s work the lack of discussion of relations in each specimen above is felt as an absence. The implication for Ark is confirmation that relations between things are central to its approach to composition.

Conclusion

FOA and Reiser Umemoto both identify issues with the use of taxonomy and their own schemes. They address them through critical frameworks in the form of texts that acknowledge the limitations of their apparatuses and press on in the belief that their pros outweigh their cons. Here I have sought to do the same.

Taxonomy has a place in architecture as a means of communicating ideas. It is clear and direct as a means ideally to the effect of reinforcing the idea communicated. It also has a tendency to objectify the content of the idea. In combination, these qualities reflect a sense of the content being fixed or certain. None of these qualities are problematic on their own, but when taxonomy is used to communicate ideas concerning architectural composition – which is arguably just as concerned with relations between things as the things themselves – an issue presents. Compositional relations would seem to resist the kinds of objective description that taxonomy demands. Recognising this raises questions about the suitability of it as a means to discuss ideas about the practice of composition.

In response, Ark’s taxonomy calls out the non-objects of compositional relations between elements and places them alongside the elements themselves as entities for examination. Doing so catalysed an unfolding understanding of the activity of composition in architecture as the bringing into being of a shifting assemblage of mutually affected elements and relations. The process of that unfolding is recorded in *Ark: pursuing qualities of relation*. Ark’s taxonomy, enfolded in the pages that follow here, stands as an outcome that, in its provisionality, exemplifies this understanding.
THE PRIMARY COMPOSITIONAL PARTS

The same set of six different parts appears in each project. The parts are the diagrammatic volume, constructed space, articulated plane, operative backdrop, mannered skin and the variable. Each part might consist of a few different components, and each component might consist of a number of elements. Please refer to the catalogue of parts folded opposite.

The DIAGRAMMATIC VOLUME is the opening move in the design process. It is a designed condition that brings feelings for site together with basic considerations such as sun path, winds, the position of trees and the views they frame or shield. When these are overlaid with regulatory constraints, and then overlaid again with considerations of brief and budget, the result is a sort of diagram of project predispositions that consists of both qualitative and quantitative information.

The CONSTRUCTED SPACE is an interstitial space that is often created by removing part of the diagrammatic volume. It is a principal spatial organizational device that may connect laterally (back through to front), and/or vertically (below to above).

The ARTICULATED PLANE is usually the primary horizontal spatial delimiter. It is articulated through its material presence but tends to be more subdued than the mannered skin.

The MANNERED SKIN is often the primary vertical spatial delimiter. Its ‘manner’ is a property of its material realization which typically demands attention.

The OPERATIVE BACKDROP is a secondary spatial delimiter which works within the boundaries established by the articulated plane and the mannered skin. It has an active role as the backdrop against which the compositional relationships between parts are made clearer. It is analogous to the white wall of a gallery which artwork is set against so that its qualities might be more clearly appreciated.

The VARIABLE physically moves to change spatial boundaries, orientation or points of focus. It is the part that punctuates the composition that the six collectively constitute. It introduces the potential for change as a key experience.

The parts tend to be distinguished from one another in terms of form and material. They are held apart in order to establish clear boundaries and therefore clearer relations between them. The means of holding them apart is often a negative detail.

Certain ruptures between design intention and design outcome are highlighted in the Albany House and Langs Bach projects with a white ‘does-not-equal’ sign set inside a red circle. These are termed ‘discrepancies’ and are discussed in Ark: Pursuing Qualities of Relation in terms of the role they played in the development of the taxonomy and understanding the compositional tendencies presented here.
QUALITIES OF RELATION

While the work demonstrates an attention to parts, it demonstrates just as much attention to their relations with one another. Despite the parts finding different specific form in each project, the same three types of quality of relation appear between them. I have called them ‘tension’, ‘provisionality’ and ‘poise’. Generally these are nested one within the other where qualities of tension lay down the conditions for provisionality which lay down conditions for moments of poise.

TENSION is an on-going sense of ‘tightness’ between (often multiple) things that pull in different directions while remaining often uncomfortably bound together. In terms of composition, ‘harmony’ is commonly discussed as an ideal state of ‘wholeness’ or ‘oneness’ that is to be strived for. ‘Tension’ in some respects is the opposite in that it involves a not-quite-rightness, or the parts not being ‘as one’, or that they feel ready to break apart. Tension is made more controllable by establishing clear boundaries between parts, and by expressing them as entities that are complete in themselves.

PROVISIONALITY is a sense-of-the-provisional. It surfaces in the work as a feeling that the parts are temporarily ‘held-in-suspense-with’ one another, their relations being contingent upon something else, rather than feeling ‘fixed-in-relation-to’ one another. Provisionality is largely (but not wholly) the result of the individual tensions playing out in the overall composition.

POISE is a condition experienced at thresholds. It is an experience of passing from one condition to another where the act of suspension (between the multiple parts and relations between them) is at its most dynamic. Moments of poise punctuate the architectural experience whether in space or in the design process.

A catalogue of qualities is folded opposite. For each project the same photo (or section in the case of Ecotech) is repeated. Each repetition is overlaid with red symbol notation. They show separately how the three qualities of relation the research is concerned with appear in each project.

Following on is documentation of each project set out in terms of the parts and the qualities of relation. It recontextualises the information catalogued here and consists of a combination of text, isometric line drawings, details, images of material samples and photographs. In terms of format, there are no figure numbers referred to in the text. All figures relate directly to the text (and other content) of the spread on which it is located.
PROJECT OVERVIEW

Ark designed three houses in close proximity to each other in a new suburb on Auckland’s conservative North Shore. In the immediate vicinity, up a right-of-way, was a triangular site with a difficult slope. Stirred by the other three, a single man in his twenties brought the fourth site and asked Ark to design a three bedroom house with a separate studio apartment. The project began at the same time as this PhD.

DIAGRAMMATIC VOLUME

A simple, diagrammatic volume (A) runs parallel to the longest boundary of the triangular site dividing the site lengthways into front and back. The volume negotiates significant differences in ground levels between the front and back boundaries.

CONSTRUCTED SPACE

A space is constructed (B) by punching through the diagrammatic volume and excavating from the adjacent portion of the site. It runs perpendicular to the volume reaching through it to the back boundary. It is set a half storey below ground level at the back boundary and connects the back of the site to the front through the volume. A smaller instance of the constructed space (C) is centred above the larger. Running parallel to the volume, a narrow, shallow, horizontal void has been cut out to be occupied as a balcony.
ARTICULATED PLANE

Conceptually, a datum level is extended from the ground level at the back boundary across the site to clearly delineate between ‘in-ground’ and ‘above-ground’. The articulated plane works in-ground and appears in three instances. The first reworks the difficult site topography into three stepped levels. The second consists of concrete steps, platforms and retaining walls that line the courtyard formed by the constructed space. The third instance of the articulated plane is narrow strip of concrete that negotiates access into the building. This instance fine-tunes the work of the other two. It runs from where the driveway meets the top edge of the courtyard retaining wall, down one set of steps, into a platform where it turns, down another set of steps into a lower platform held 150mm above the floor of the courtyard, and from there it extends into the core of the building. The planes strain against the diagonal of the back boundary. They seek to hold to a rectilinear geometry. The firmness with which that rectilinearity is held to in the x and y axes allows for freer variation in the z axis where cuts and fills make level surfaces which mediate between the building and the site, and spaces that gather the sun and a sense of privacy.
MANNERED SKIN

At Albany the mannered skin consists of horizontal, rusticated cedar weatherboards that wrap the building. The joins between the weatherboards are secreted giving the volume a quality of mass. The skin steps up half a level from the datum at the top of the courtyard wall to bridge over the constructed space. The ‘bridge’ contains bedrooms and a bathroom while the living area occupies the space below. The long window to the back of the garage and two small windows to the courtyard give some respite to the staunch face of the mannered skin. All the other windows and doors are gathered within the precise, larger scale incisions defined by the constructed space – those to the main bedroom, to either side of the living space, and to the balcony above. This grouping establishes a scalar similarity between the windows and doors and the timber cladding. With that scalar similarity and their positioning, the groups of doors and windows compositionally lock the timber volume on top of the articulated plane.

OPERATIVE BACKDROP

In section, the operative backdrop articulates the space under and within the bridge delineating between public and private spaces. It reaches up between the second level bedroom and bathroom spaces to skylights in the second level ceiling that deliver light down through narrow double height voids into the living space under the bridge. The corridor connecting the bedrooms and bathroom on the second level bears a dimensional similarity to these voids. It is open to them and through them the corridor is connected to the living space below. The stepping and reaching of the operative backdrop delivers vertical connection and a sense of drama through the play of light within the narrow, double height spaces across the course of the day.¹

¹ The narrow double height spaces weren’t realised in the built outcome due to the insertion of a 4th bedroom in the bridge above the living room. Vestiges of this reaching, vertical space were realised in the two small voids that connect the living room to the passage to skylights above.
VARIABLE

The variables at Albany take the form of retractable fabric canopies set above the doors to either side of the living space. They extend out over the grassed terrace to the east and over the courtyard to the west. Through that extension they effectively reorient the living space from north-south to east-west, connecting the space from the courtyard, through the interior living/dining/kitchen space below the bridge, out onto the terrace. These are proprietary devices but their action has the specific effect of adapting the living space according to the social situation or the season.2

2 While the details to take the canopies were realised the canopy units were not installed.
The pronounced differences between the clearly defined compositional roles and locations of each part limit the potential for tensions to proliferate. While there is tension between the mannered skin and the articulated plane it is eased by two factors. The datum level that delineates between in-ground and above-ground is registered in the negative detail between the top of the concrete wall and the bottom edge of the timber weatherboards. It clearly defines the place of each part in space and both supports and contains the tension between the two parts. The clear statement of the formal primacy of the mannered skin elevated over the in-ground, complexity of the articulated plane further diffuses the tension.

Provisionality is similarly muted, not least by the compositional locking of mannered skin to articulated plane achieved through the grouped windows and doors that transgress the negative detail between them.
The relations between the parts feel relatively fixed but the building still presents something of the qualities generally sought in the work. It builds and gets played out through a sequence of thresholds and moments of poise that collectively describe a protocol of approach.

The first moment is experienced on passing through the gate (1). Across the forecourt of the driveway the staunch, timber volume extends away at an acute angle to the boundary. It steps up half a storey to bridge over the submerged concrete base and courtyard. The garage is secreted, the front door is obscured, the building resists entry. A clue as to how to approach is provided by a concrete step drawn back toward the boundary, away from the house. On reaching the step, standing above the sunken courtyard, the second moment unfolds (2). This is a threshold between the public space of the driveway and the more private outdoor living space of the courtyard. The steps descend toward the courtyard and the front door. It protracts from the first step, down to one platform and onto another. The next moment presents on this lower platform, below ground level and when confronted by the two storey exterior wall of the house (3). Passing through the front door, the floating wall (the lower portion of the operative backdrop) is held away from the door. The narrow slot between them offers a glimpse (from a still slightly elevated position) across the living space to the kitchen (4). This slot punctuates a sense of being watched that grew from the top step above the courtyard. The first reprieve from this sense is to be had behind the floating wall where it becomes more a sense of anticipation of arrival. It is a place to re-compose oneself. The floor steps down behind the floating wall to terminate the entry in an ante-space to the living room (5). Turning from the view to the Hauraki Gulf toward the living space, the full extent of the constructed space becomes apparent. The plane folds to accommodate it while the operative backdrop rises and falls inside the mannered skin as it reaches over it.
PROJECT OVERVIEW

EcoStore is a celebrated New Zealand based company that specialises in environmentally sound household products. Ecotech is EcoStore’s manufacturing arm. Ecotech needed to expand to meet EcoStore’s demand. Ark was asked to develop a proposal that would provoke a response from the EcoStore’s governing board as it considered possible expansion in relation to the company’s aspirations. Would it be an ecological apologist or address the ecological versus economic tension by confronting it in a positive way?

In 2009 EcoStore was named New Zealand Sustainable Business of the Year, a significant award that then CEO Mitch Cuevas attributed in large part to the consideration demonstrated in the project. He subsequently parted company with EcoStore. The project concluded at the preliminary design stage.

Ecotech is a project for a manufacturing facility and sustainable business precinct. The complex is an unapologetic intervention that confidently anticipates its own, eventual, positive ecological and economic impact. It occupies a brown-field site – the site of a car wrecker’s yard for more than a generation – on the inner edge of the Waitemata Harbour in Avondale, Auckland. The project embraces the adjacent motorway, the necessity of the car park, and the concrete construction it relies upon to achieve the scale of the spaces intended. But beyond the issues of embodied and consumed energy is a contingent design proposition ready for the input of specialist knowledge that will bring the often conflicting paradigms of economics and ecology into relation with one another to render a highly specific architectural proposition. The complex is most visible from the north-western motorway. Drivers passing are to read it as vegetative wedge extruded from the site. Suspended above the wedge are three timber-clad perforated blocks of equal widths but varying heights. The complex is a ‘maximum build condition’ designed to utilise the maximum amount of space available on the site according to a negotiation between regulations and the requirements of the brief.

The programmatic imperatives are vertically stacked with office over car park over factory on site. This spatial arrangement renders the architectural relationship between these programmatically related elements problematic and their necessary connections thematic to the project. Conversely, the project is staged horizontally over time and the complex as a result is articulated in four modules, each being the output of a projected stage in the development.¹

¹ Ecotech is diagrammed in the taxonomy in its intended completed state.
The ground floor (A) houses inwards and outwards goods storage, powder and liquids manufacturing, packaging and plant rooms. Suspended over these core operations, and stretched along the perimeters of the factory modules is a mezzanine level (B) with direct visual connections down into the factory. The mezzanine is configured as discrete fingers of linear space that house in sequence, west to east a retail outlet, staff locker rooms, canteen and recreational facilities, laboratories, and offices related to EcoStore operations.

The car park (C) is essentially a ramped, contiguous plane that has been cut and folded from the site. Above, the office tenancies (D) range in size from 35m² to 1200m². They are projected to be occupied by smaller organisations either related to or wanting to be associated with the EcoStore brand. The configuration of the spaces is highly porous. The space between tenancies is projected as semi-public circulation space aimed at facilitating the kinds of interactions between tenants that would make this level a compelling place to be. The roof surfaces (E) of each tenancy are active in that they are able to be occupied and are used for the collection of water and solar power.

The Ecotech complex aspires to self-sufficiency within the limits of predictable fluctuation of supply and demand for resources. Wind power drives the factory while solar power drives the individual upper level office tenancies. Water is collected off the roofs of the site with any surplus being collected in tanks located on the car park below for purification and use in the factory. Any shortfall may be addressed by drawing from mains. In terms of waste, soil remediation reactors stretch along the south-western boundary of the site for purposes of dealing with contaminated soil onsite (F). They also provide platforms for vertical axis wind turbines and the locations for dangerous goods stores. Tanks to collect the liquid born waste products of the factory processes are located beneath the factory floor. The material is treated and fed to the ‘green wall’ (G) the vertical greenhouse set between the factory and the harbour’s edge. This will be tended and harvested by Ecotech employees for the benefit of their own households.

Ecotech presents the same six parts but at a scale that is significantly larger than the other four projects examined in the taxonomy.
**DIAGRAMMATIC VOLUME**

The diagrammatic volume (H) is defined in space by a 20 metre vertical extrusion of the site boundaries and a corresponding offsetting from the site’s surface.

**CONSTRUCTED SPACE**

The constructed space (J) takes the form of 8 metre wide vertical slots. Running vertically in the slots are services and circulation which connect the factory, warehouse and offices through the car park to the tenancies above. Daylight is also directed down through the slots.
ARTICULATED PLANE

The articulated plane is the primary delimiter of space and programme: factory, warehouse and offices below the plane; car park on the plane; tenancies suspended above. To begin with (conceptually) the articulated plane is a concrete surface of 190 by 130 metres that slopes south-east. The first cut to it runs parallel to the south-western boundary. It allows the driveway to remain on the ground and to be folded into ramps and planes to accommodate truck manoeuvres and the soil remediation reactors along the south-western boundary. The remainder of the concrete plane is hinged along the north-western boundary (adjacent to the road). The opposite edge (south-eastern or water-side) is lifted 10 metres up off the ground (lift 1). 8 metre wide slots (the constructed space) are cut from the plane. They allow the middle portion of the plane to lift again (lift 2). The outcome is a car park consisting of four 18 metre wide ramps.

MANNERED SKIN

The mannered skin is present in the form of three timber-clad volumes elevated over the car park. The skin has a fractal-like perforation. Each perforation has the same proportion but their scales vary. This consistent manner of perforation to the mannered skin causes the three volumes to be read together. Collectively they work at a scale comparable to that of the articulated plane below.
OPERATIVE BACKDROP

The operative backdrop at Ecotech consists of two glazed curtain walls offset from one another. They follow the north-eastern and south-eastern edges of the articulated plane, stretching from the underside of the plane down to ground level. The outer curtain wall is flush with the outer edge of the car park above; the inner wall is set 2.5 metres back into the factory. It is the backdrop against which everything from factory operations to employee relationships takes place.

VARIABLE

The variable occurs in the space between the glass curtain walls in the vertical greenhouse. It is tended by the employees for the benefit of their own households and the daily and seasonal dynamics of gardening play out within it. The variable is an active component in factory operations in that waste products from environmentally sound manufacturing processes are pumped up and gravity fed to provide nutrients to the produce. It is also active in the identity of the factory complex and client organisation in that the wall makes (and substantiates) aspirational statements about the green economy the project seeks to catalyse and be a beacon for.
There is a tension in the compositional relation between the greenhouse, the car park and the timber masses floating above. Tensions follow through into the project through a series of adjacencies aimed at provoking discussion. For instance, the vertical greenhouse in the wall adjacent to the motorway, and the onsite soil remediation reactors, complete with wind turbines, adjacent to the truck access.

Provisionality appears in Ecotech in different ways. There is a sort of temporal and social provisionality experienced in the daily and seasonal tending of the vertical green house. They have the potential to bring employees into contact with one another in the pursuit of common goals – the CEO with the junior storeman – at different times of day and different times of the year. A type of compositional provisionality plays out through the movement of the cars on the car park between the greenhouse below and the timber masses above. It articulates the space between the parts and emphasizes their relative compositional independence. Punctuating this type of provisionality is the apparent lightness of the timber boxes floating high in the air, exposed to the wind and the rain, precariously poised on the edge of a harbour. The perforations in the boxes, the open-to-the sky terrace on the top floor, and the light chimneys – all set in relation to the heaviness of the concrete plane below – emphasize the sense or even potential for this space to change either by will or weather.
At this stage in the development of the project certain moments of poise are evident. One lies on the ramp in the ‘on grade’ storm-water system. Another is in the large balcony voids in the timber volumes. Others are yet to be found as the project develops. Of those that exist at the preliminary design stage, the most poignant moment of poise is located in relation to one’s own garden in the green wall. It is the space between the operation of an ecologically and economically aspirational commercial enterprise and the problematic context it seeks to address (represented by the motorway in the foreground and the city in the distance). The operative backdrop, the variable and the articulated plane are brought together. They frame the actions of the individual – the tending to the garden to feed themselves – as important in relation to the building, the business operation, and the world beyond.
The contractor is to verify all dimensions, angles, site measurements & conditions etc. before fabrication or construction begins.
PROJECT OVERVIEW

The property at Langs Beach north of Auckland has been in the same family for four generations. The house that stood on the site dated from the late 1930s and had become decrepit. The site slopes northward down to the sea and has expansive views out to the Hauraki Gulf but it had become overgrown. The clients – my wife’s cousins – decided to clear the site and build something new for their children to grow into. Ark was the architect and main contractor for the project. Set on the site of the old house, the project outcome is essentially a large timber terrace under a timber pergola. Sandwiched between them are two timber clad volumes that are tapered in plan. The larger contains the domestic functions while the smaller is a boat store.
DIAGRAMMATIC VOLUME

The diagrammatic volume (A) lies across the site at the top of the slope, which is thus divided into back (to the drive) and front (to the view).

CONSTRUCTED SPACE

A wedge of space (B) is cut from the diagrammatic volume leaving a volume on either side. The space between the two connects the back of the site to the front. From the wedge a smaller space is cored out (C) - a hole within a hole equates to a mass - and a concrete fireplace is inserted to define a point of social focus.¹

¹ The fireplace was not realised in the built outcome.

ARTICULATED PLANE

The articulated plane appears three times: as the deck; as the floor that steps to articulate the division between two living spaces inside; and again as the pergola above supported on timber posts set on a 3.2 by 2.4 metre grid. The deck folds and bends as ramps and steps near the garage connecting the deck to the drive, while the pergola folds over the deck to make the extent of the architectural intervention clear.²

² The vertical edges of the pergola were left off the built outcome.
MANNERED SKIN

A white polycarbonate mannered skin is set back from the sides of each of the remaining parts of the diagrammatic volume. It delineates between interior and exterior. The mannered skin appears again in a number of smaller scale instances inside. Timbers from the old house that stood on the site for four generations have been reused: recycled kauri weatherboards line the ceiling (D); recycled rimu framing has been re-machined and laid as flooring (E); and recycled rimu match-lining lines both sides of the sliding doors (F & G). These varying instances of the mannered skin jar slightly with one another and more so with the addition of the grey stain to the flooring. Compositionally they are held together through the consistency of their parallel orientation to one another to establish the ‘grain’ of the space and through the operative backdrop that they are set in relation to.

3 The polycarbonate was replaced by a dark stained timber board and batten in the built outcome (H).
OPERATIVE BACKDROP

The operative backdrop of the white wall is the principle delineator of internal spaces and the background against which the various instances of other parts are set. It allows the differing patches of timber skin to be more themselves and allows difference between them without conflict. The operative backdrop is thus an active mediator that holds the floor, doors, and ceiling apart and together. This action is supported by negative details such as that between the ceiling and the white wall. The red line in the image follows a 30 millimetre negative detail in the ceiling plane between the two. What results is an underlined sense of independence between the floor, doors, and ceiling and a stronger concept of the composition as parts in temporary (rather than fixed) relations.

VARIABLE

The variable appears at Langs in both the new, smooth, satin-white, sliding cabinet and sliding, mannered-skinned doors. One side of the doors has been CNC milled, the other sports the original pastel colours of the old kitchen and laundry. The cabinet and the doors slide perpendicularly to one another to close off or open up the kids living/sleeping area to the main living space. They render the space able to adapt to accommodate the full range of stuff and social situations expected to take place within the building.
At Langs there is tension between the articulated plane and the tapered, mannered skin volumes — the material and geometric properties of the pergola don’t align with that of the cladding. Their primary ‘pergola deck’ to secondary ‘house’ relationship inverts the conventional hierarchy present in the surrounding buildings and exaggerates that tension. It is exaggerated further by the perfunctory manner in which the skin is perforated by doors and windows according to the programme inside. This jars against the rhythm of the pergola. Inside, smaller scale tensions lie between the floor, ceiling, doors and the white wall.

The experiences of the pergola deck to tapered volume tension; the loose compositional relationship between the floor, doors, and ceiling; the tension between the new satin white cabinet and the old, stripey paddels to the sliding doors (amongst other such inter-part relationships) collectively bring a sense of the provisional. It is heightened by the ability of the cabinet and the doors (the variables) to physically shift in relation to one another, and in doing so to effect substantial change in a variety of spatial and social relationships, from alone to together; from enclosed to exposed; from back to front; from dark to light.
Moments of poise at Langs are set in a sequence. The approach to the house is via a right of way reached after a long drive north from Auckland. On stepping out of the car (1) the plane of the deck folds down as steps adjacent to the boat store. At the top of the steps (2) the view to Little Barrier Island is framed (through the constructed space) between the pergola, posts and deck, and the walls of the boat store and house. The entry is a squared indentation in the mannered skin and is defined further by a single step up in the deck plane (3) to the front door. Passing through the front door, following along the white wall on the left, with the (variable) sliding cabinet on the right, and pausing at the step down to the main living space (4) the busy-ness of the interior is evident. Punctuated by the meeting of the sliding doors and cabinet, this is the moment where the relations between the parts are at their most dynamic.
PROJECT OVERVIEW

Haast Street is an alteration to my own house. It reconfigures three rooms in a 1930's bungalow: the dining room, kitchen and family room. Conceptually the project seizes awkward details introduced by previous owners as points from which to develop a new compositional overlay for the compromised (but still evident) composition of the old bungalow. Existing details taken on and developed through this approach included an exposed, crooked, rough-sawn timber beam, a stained and scarred timber kitchen, small jinks in walls, and a strange bulkhead between the kitchen and dining room. The scale of the project and the depth of involvement I had in it allowed the detail of the project to be followed through into the outcome and to be examined through the taxonomy.

DIAGRAMMATIC VOLUME

The diagrammatic volume (A) is the whole house.

CONSTRUCTED SPACE

The space constructed from the volume (B) hollows out the existing kitchen to make space for a new, wide, galley kitchen. The new space establishes stronger connections from the living room, through the dining room, through the kitchen, to the family room.
ARTICULATED PLANE

The existing bulkhead (C) between the kitchen and dining room takes on the role of an articulated plane, one of three in the project. The existing corner library sits beneath the bulkhead in a small alcove. The second articulated plane (D) drops from the ceiling above a window, above the kitchen bench. It takes the form of a long, high cabinet of white laminate on 18 millimetre plywood and contains wares that aren’t used so often such as baking trays, platters and vases. The third articulated plane (E) is a new bulkhead. It drops from the ceiling of the family room to wrap the existing rough-sawn timber beam, and to distinguish the stairwell from the family room. The space under this third bulkhead is occupied by a timber leaner and black metal stools.
MANNERED SKIN

Two instances of the mannered skin are present. The first is the old matai timber floor (F) that has had the 1980’s cork flooring and polyurethane sanded off it to expose 80 years of bora riddle, nail strike and the general wear of kitchen use. The second is a new splash-back to the kitchen bench that consists of glossy black, rippled tiles (G). The grout lines between the tiles are slight and have black stain rubbed into them to make the tile module recede and to bring the ripple of the tiles forward. Both instances of the mannered skin are set against the whiteness of the walls and cabinets. The kitchen bench is 90 millimetres deep and wrapped in stainless steel. Under it are cabinets of the same white laminate-on-plywood as that above the splash-back and the floor to ceiling cabinets opposite.

VARIABLE

The variable is slight at Haast Street but it has a major impact on the relationships playing out in the kitchen. While the exterior of the new cabinetry is a sedate, satin-white the interior is a ‘road marking’ yellow. When the white door of a cabinet is opened to expose the yellow-ness of its interior the seriousness of the scheme collapses.
OPERATIVE BACKDROP

At Haast Street the operative backdrop might be expected to be the existing white walls but a number of factors undermine their coherence and thus their capacity to operate as the operative backdrop. They include the amount of jinking that the walls do, the odd relations between the walls and the bulkhead, and the scars on the floor that tell where the walls originally were. Against this background the awkward details forced themselves forward into consideration.

The compromised coherence of the walls is mitigated through the inclusion of other parts and the patterns they introduce. For instance, the floor-to-ceiling kitchen cabinets define a vertical surface that (almost) matches the white of the walls. And the lights in the living, dining, family rooms and kitchen are identical and set at the same height throughout. Another example lies in each of the four rooms having a black point of focus set centrally on the white southern wall: the TV to the living room; the fireplace to the dining room; the splash-back to the kitchen; and the black framed photo to the family room.

The three bulkheads (articulated planes) constitute another pattern in the composition. So too do the pairs of recycled panel doors set between the dining room and living room and between the dining room and the kitchen. They match those in the rest of the house. The coloured carpets to each space, while not the same colour, are related in that they are from the same range with the same texture and edging detail. They are all similar in scale and shape, and all finish well away from the skirting. Dimensional consistency is also a factor – the bench-tops, the kick-space, and the architraves are all 90 millimetres.

The operative backdrop part at Haast Street doesn’t consist of one type of component but of a number of types of component. Each component consists of a pattern of repeated elements. Coherence in the operative backdrop builds as a pattern of these patterns. With that coherence the awkward details recede and focus shifts to the qualities of relations between the parts.

TENSION

The principle tension in the project lies between the operative backdrop (present in the uniform, stippled, satin white laminate-on-plywood of the cabinets) and the mannered skin (present in the scarred, yellowy-brown coloured (heart and sap wood) matai floor). That tension is punctuated by the rhythm of the nickel-plated square loop handles to the cabinets relative to the bora riddle and epoxy-filled holes of the floor. The tension might also be interpreted as lying between the new (cabinets) and the old (floor), a relationship that brings a sense of time and occupation to the space.
PROVISIONALITY

Against the base tension between the cabinets and the floor, secondary tensions play out. That between the white walls/cabinets and the black, rippled tiles is one example. These aggregate to give a sense of provisionality. One specific secondary tension underlines that sense, and it isn’t found so much between parts in the compositional system as it is within the larger components that make up the operative backdrop part, that is, between the walls and the cabinets. A 20 millimetre negative detail holds them apart. While both are white and orthogonal, they differ in their texture and detail.

The stippled satin of the cabinets jars slightly with the matt-white of the acrylic paint on the walls. That difference is punctuated by the exposed edge of the plywood cabinets relative to the enamel paint of the skirting and architraves to the wall. The walls sport 90 millimetre architraves and 140 millimetre skirting, relatively large timber details set proud of the wall plane. The handles to the doors to the walls are round and painted to match. Meanwhile, the nickel plated handles to the cabinets are rectangular with cut out rectangular loops. The cabinets stand flush with 2 millimetre tolerances between the doors.

The difference between the two is perhaps most evident at the floor where the proud, 140 millimetre skirting returns into the 20 millimetre negative detail. Running in at the ninety degrees to the skirting, the 90 millimetre kick space is retracted back from the face of the cabinets. This dimensional and spatial misalignment between a positive (skirting) and negative (kick-space) detail further punctuates the sense that these two elements belong to different times – the walls are old, the cabinets are new. The two are similar but independent, and while they stand in relation to each other there is no suggestion that this relationship is permanent.
Haast Street presents two moments of poise. The first leverages the relationship between the existing bulkhead and the wall below it (between the dining room and kitchen) that is, between the articulated plane and the operative backdrop (1). At its widest the bulkhead measures 1.2 metres, enough to house a small library. The kitchen wall juts forward into the dining room narrowing the bulkhead to 0.6 metres.

Prior to the renovation the wall was cluttered. It held the library, a single door that opened into the kitchen (into the side of a cabinet) and a set of bi-fold shutters set into an exposed rimu surround aimed at framing the person working at the kitchen bench for those sitting in the dining room. It was all too busy and the library was marginalized as just another condition among too many others.

The renovation replaced the door and the shutters with a pair of recycled panel doors that match the others in the house. The effect was to bring clarity to the relationship between the operative backdrop of the wall and the articulated plane of the bulkhead above. Together they de-clutter and redefine the threshold between the dining room and kitchen to set up a moment of poise that is experienced when the pair of doors is opened. This action brings a level of drama in itself but it is heightened in that opening the doors connects two very different spaces: a formal, public, quieter, colder, darker dining room to a less formal, private, noisier, warmer, lighter kitchen. The threshold set up by the articulated plane and the operative backdrop holds apart and exaggerates the qualitative difference between the two spaces.

Accompanying tension and provisionality in the project is a level of seriousness that builds and becomes the background against which the second moment of poise plays out (2). When the white door of a kitchen cabinet is opened to expose the yellow-ness of the interior a level of frivolity is instantly introduced. The carefully set up drama between the old and new, and the sense of time thus established, can’t withstand the humour of the yellow and it shifts the impact of the composition as a whole.
LAB at the 5th Auckland Art Triennial
PROJECT OVERVIEW

Between May and August 2013 the 5th Auckland Art Triennial brought Auckland’s art community together for different events in venues across the city. Central to the Triennial was the Lab, described by curator Hou Hanru as ‘the brain’ of the event. It was set in the Chartwell Gallery of the Auckland Art Gallery. The Lab accommodated five successive architectural exhibitors operating on ‘live’ projects, each for three weeks at a time.

Ark was invited to design (and build) the Lab. We aimed to produce an active, adaptable context for a range of works to play out in relation to. The outcome was a kit-of-parts that was turned over to the exhibitors to adapt to meet the needs of their individual projects.

With tight budget and time constraints we sought out existing, redundant things that might be recast into the project. Objects were drawn from the back (working) room of the gallery to the front (display) room as devices for both work and display. Old gallery frames became display devices hung in mid-space rather than against walls. Gallery storage crates were set on castors and occupied a role in between – sometimes seat, sometimes model base, sometimes table, sometimes projector stand or lectern. Well-used table tops from the architecture studios at the University of Auckland were made into seats and a work surface. Carpet offcuts (soft rectangular patches of bright blue, red or orange) scavenged from one of Ark’s suppliers and edged by another, were rolled out on the gallery floor.
DIAGRAMMATIC VOLUME

Set within the Chartwell Gallery, the diagrammatic volume was the 15 by 10 by 4 metre high space that the Lab occupied. It was a given in terms of its size but it also came with a predefined quality of ‘public gallery’, a quality that as the project unfolded, as we brought the backroom to the front, we realised we were working against.

ARTICULATED PLANE

The articulated plane at the Lab found form in the blue, orange and deep red coloured carpets rolled out and juxtaposed against the bleached, exposed aggregate concrete of the gallery floor. Each defined a space to gather around or on.

OPERATIVE BACKDROP

The limits of the diagrammatic volume were defined largely by the operative backdrop of the (white) gallery partitions.
MANNERED SKIN

Two types of furniture family were set on castors to define two instances of the mannered skin. Bleacher seats (A & B) and a long table (C) were made from the old, plywood, studio table tops. They bore the scars of many year’s worth of student endeavour – knife cuts, paint, glue, graffiti. They accommodated people by providing spaces to sit and to lean, to work and to listen. The second furniture family consisted of the coloured gallery art storage boxes (D & E). They accommodated work (principally architectural models) and the odd projector. They proved to be both the most perfunctory of items and yet the most mobile. The shifting display of models and images projected from them changed points of focus in the space.
CONSTRUCTED SPACE

The old frames taken from the gallery warehouse were cleaned, drilled and fitted with a pair of hooks and a pair of fold-back clips. The hooks enabled them to be hung from aluminium channels suspended on rods fixed to the ceiling. The clips allowed them to hold work. In the gallery, to begin with, the frames were run in four parallel lines along the length of the space, twenty-five per line. Each exhibitor shifted the frames into groups to suit the work they showed. Space was constructed between groups of frames hung on adjacent lines.

VARIABLE

The carpets, bleachers, crates and (especially) the frames shared the role of the variable. With the components of the parts being so mobile, the composition wasn’t reliant upon a single part or to provide the potential for change.
The composition played out at both the scale of the gallery space and at the scale of the body. At the scale of the gallery, the principal tension worked between the operative backdrop of the white gallery partitions, and the mannered skin of the 8.4 metre long leaner table. The relationship between the gallery partitions and the long table both structured the space and determined the sense of activity to be carried out in it whether that was work or display. Changing the position of the table in the space changed the level of tension in the relationship and thus the quality of space.

If the table ran diagonally in the space (transgressing the orthogonality of the partitions) the tension was at its maximum, the space was at its most dynamic, the table was focal and tended toward being used as a work surface. If the table ran parallel to the partitions and was placed centrally in the space the tension was diffused somewhat and the space was more sedate. In this position the table became less a work surface and more a display surface. Models set on the table tended to gather related drawings and images in frames hung above. If the table ran parallel and was set against the partitions the tension was lost. In this case the table became a surface for display but in being set against the whiteness of the gallery partitions it felt old and dirty and it detracted from the work. This type of tension is very similar to the tension between the cabinets and the floor at Haast Street. It lies between the same parts – the operative backdrop and the mannered skin. But while the tension at Haast Street held, at the Lab it collapsed when the two were brought too close together.

There were a number of factors that contributed to that difference in outcome. Determining and maintaining space between the two parts is perhaps the most obvious. At Haast Street the space between the parts is managed by either a 90mm kick-space or a 140mm skirting board, and the tension operates. The Lab on the other hand allowed the table to be pushed right up against the wall (which was how the issue was first noticed). Another factor was the timber of the parts and how the parts were detailed before being brought into relation with the respective white walls. While at the Lab the scarred plywood table was butt-jointed and sported exposed plywood edges, at Haast Street the matai timber flooring was a two dimensional surface that didn’t expose any end grain. The patina of the bora riddle at Haast Street didn’t feel dirty as the scarred plywood did at the Lab. Somehow the bora riddled matai was acceptable while the scarred plywood wasn’t. The word ‘acceptable’ also suggests social propriety to be a factor. While a close pairing of old timber and pristine white wall worked in the social context of kitchen of an old bungalow, it didn’t work in the social context of a public art gallery.

Determining the position of the long table was the first task for each successive exhibitor. Once completed the compositional system was able to play out at a body scale. This tended to run from locating the bleachers and carpets, to then positioning the frames, to finally locating the gallery crates. Bleachers tended to border carpets. No matter where one was positioned the other wanted to follow, and if it wasn’t able to, then the other would return to a position where they could be together. These instances of the mannered skin and articulated plane demonstrated a sort of compositional bond. Together they defined space to work, sit and discuss. Conversely, they developed a resistance to the hanging frames. Groups of frames tended to both find positions between the carpet / bleacher combinations, and to find positions in relation to other groups of frames hung from adjacent channels. Adjacent groups of frames defined space between them (the constructed spaces). These were spaces for display, for standing and contemplating and they presented a spatial intensity that corresponded with a heightened experience of the work they displayed. Two types of sub-space were thus present within the Lab: a kind of ‘solid’, intense space between groups of frames for display and contemplation; and a ‘void’, relaxed space occupied by the carpet / bleacher combinations for collective work and discussion.
By its nature the Lab was provisional, a platform for a three month long show, with shifting parts to accommodate the demands of five successive exhibitors. The compositional formula played out to realize and extrapolate that sense of the provisional which was inherent to the project brief. That was achieved through two means: by selecting materials that would establish tensions in their juxtaposition; and through providing every element of every part (with the exception of the operative backdrop of the gallery partitions) with a level of mobility. No one part was fixed in relation to another. The long table, the bleachers and the gallery crates were set on castors; the frames were hung and swayed slightly when one passed close by. The carpets weren't fixed to the floor but were slid around and occasionally rolled up and stored inside the removable back panels of the bleachers. The effect was to exaggerate the independence of the parts. From the scarred plywood of the bleachers and the table; to the even colours of the carpets compromised by the shifted grain left by footsteps; to the chipped gold paint and the detailed profile of the frames; to the well-worn gallery crates with pasted records of their previous contents still in place, all played off in relation to one another to the effect of expressing the temporality of their relations. By setting the play of repurposed things in relation to the smooth whiteness of the gallery partitions the sense of provisionality was exaggerated.

Two types of poise occur in the Lab. The first was experienced at the threshold to the Lab, between the sedate condition of the gallery, and the busy-ness of the Lab. The materiality of the compositional parts in the Lab made them familiar – part gallery, part studio, part home, part shed. The making practices carried out against the shifting background of the parts brought a strong sense of speculation into the space. It stood in contrast to the rest of the Gallery and upset the Gallery’s carefully constructed atmosphere of serious contemplation-of-finished-objects in much the same way as opening the door to reveal the yellow-ness of the cabinet interior in the kitchen at Haast Street.
A second type of poise occurred between the two types of body scale space within the Lab – between the ‘solid’ space defined by adjacent groups of frames, and the ‘void’ space occupied by the carpet / bleacher combinations. With each part consisting of a number of elements, each was also afforded the capacity to shift incrementally. For instance one hundred frames allowed the constructed space to shift in small increments – one hundred frames notionally might demonstrate a capacity to move in one-hundredth increments. On the other hand the mannered skin of the bleachers and long table (with five components) shifted in larger increments – notionally one-fifth increments. What this ‘incrementalisation’ of parts facilitated was a diffusion of boundaries between one part and another. This was particularly true of the frames. The result was a diffuse threshold between the space defined by the frames, and that defined by the carpets and bleachers. Moments of poise in this condition were protracted across the diffuse thresholds between the two spatial conditions. The result was a smooth fluctuation in intensity of spatial experience as one moved through the Lab. The first type of poise was indeed a moment in space. The second type of poise was a very different type of condition.