Orbits & Trajectories:

Why Architecture Must Never Stand Still

D A Saunt
Doctor of Philosophy
2013
RMIT
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Declaration
I certify that except where due acknowledgement 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.

Deborah Saunt
2nd September 2013
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Why architecture must never stand still
→ see next spread
Why architecture must never stand still

Our way of working + my roles

Why architecture must never stand still

Why architecture must never stand still

Design value = Virtuous = for the public good
Responsiveness
Authorship

Paths cross = Kinetic encounter + conversation = place
Authorship = collaboration = new beauty

Interrogating what we do
Qualities I
Awkward
Material
Landscape city/social
Responsive
Qualities II
Incompletion
Clarity
Appeal
Communicating

Being there first hand
And how we do it
Collisions

Sketching
On margins
Purpose
Not 'sector' specific
with artists makers

Location
SMLXX
Material testing

Design review
Momentum of resistance
Collaboration
Education
Mentor + role model

Research

This is why we do it
What I've discovered

Design action = Collisions + agency interventions

= Workshop process
Searching for New Beauty: Orbits and Trajectories

I realised that ever since I chose to call myself an architect I have always projected forward, drawing test-case scenarios to explore the issues of how I’d like to practice, and to see where my interests might take me.

As a necessary precursor to these future projections, I’d be sure to look back and think about where I’d got to and how and what the next step would be. There was a dialectic between these two oppositional points of view. The tension with pulling and pushing in conflicting directions – one looking back, the other forward – helped generate a sense of purpose and intent, and to plot the next move. As life became more complicated, I became aware that I didn’t really have just one option about which move I might make. In fact there were several, often contradictory or parallel, all operating simultaneously. I kept sketching and making, and then set off on the prescribed course to the future. I became an architect and along the way I met David Hills and later we created DSDHA as a platform for shared ideas. We have been lucky enough to work on some amazing projects, with fantastic clients and a great team around us. Things become more complicated as opportunities grow. I began to wonder how I could sort out the conundrum of what would come next? I realised I would have to draw a solution for the future.

I think, create and operate in three dimensions – just as most people do. I solve problems by literally drawing them out, visualising the issues concerned and then, after some iterative tests, I design a solution. Most importantly, when I start a project I insist that I question my preconceptions so that I don’t bring baggage, don’t have a fixed idea of the outcome. I try to unburden myself from the past.

I design in a way that is risky and involves an immersion in the maelstrom of ideas, actions, issues and constraints that spin tumultuously. By seeing these conditions kinetically and experienced in time, I tend to find a spatial arrangement that disentangles the knot so I can draw out the way forward. The more conflicting the challenges the better – the effect can be baffling, almost blinding or vertiginous – as long as I can calmly sit down and draw a trajectory through the competing orbits of influence.

So it has been with this study. As a spatial thinker in a realm of oscillating scales, drivers, thoughts and processes, I have had to literally illustrate the way forward. In effect, I have drawn my PhD, using sketches to represent the process of reflecting on my practice. This has created some remarkably simple, but extraordinarily powerful insights.

1 From the age of 10 I called myself an architect, when I started consciously recreating the spaces that I had seen in my dreams.
2 See Appendix for more details of practice origins.
4 As a “kinetic” learner, I find learning whilst moving much easier than being told to sit down and to concentrate.
Try drawing to explain each question
→ see next spread
Try drawing images to explain each question.

ANSWER THIS!

1. Why do a PhD? or Bit diagram
   - Why such amazing projects
   - Good collaborations
   - Teaching
   - Buildings
   - Writing/Review
   - TV/Radio
   - Awards/Valuation
   - Trips

2. How have you interrogated?
   - My PhD paper
     - Work
     - Way we work
     - Professional practice

World of colliding interests, On purpose

Building vs everything else

Practice vs academy

Practice vs theory

Returning to architecture vs acutive

Beijing professional

Contributing to architecture vs acutive

DRL

Private prof/city language vs architecture is about for people

Largenscale Urban thought

Doing projects vs

Discourse

Notes:

- Smiling
- Boring
- Simple components
- rice
- tan
- solid
3. WHAT I HAVE DISCOVERED?

- Forum through drawing, models, or models (in color).
- Shared knowledge: drawing shows thinking.
- Architecture must understand and can only happen.
- A good public space is where paths cross.
- Why a public space is part of architecture.
- Being responsive, alert to context, place.
- Good work is performed on site.
- Our nature is to be social.
- Gender: a missing balancing act.

Try to explain each question.
Up all night: in a maelstrom of ideas, John’s desk before a presentation
for me to build upon that would never have been revealed otherwise.

After a series of six-monthly reviews at the Practice Research Symposia, I jettisoned the formal narrative of my previous intermittent presentations. Instead I chose to present my investigations by pinning up loose drawings straight from my sketchbook. This more fluid, less hierarchical manner with which to simultaneously present emerging thoughts offered myself and my audience the chance to literally stand back and reflect on all the aspects of the work.

With the benefit of hindsight, I can see that this is the very method we have evolved at DSDHA to develop our designs. During the formation and development of our designs we periodically, pin everything on the wall, as a way to 'lay bare' the process and thoughts that occur. This method is consciously shifting as a result of absorbing and making use of the learning and discoveries of this doctoral study.

I have named this way of simultaneously considering several issues, options, images and possibilities “Orbits and Trajectories”. This transitory phenomenon describes a way to capture how one’s eye and mind must travel between many key areas simultaneously. Having called it many things before, Orbits and Trajectories is a title that captures the kinetic energy and risks that I believe need to be harnessed in both the making of architecture as a creative process, and within the qualities of the end product itself.

I wondered: was it like spinning imagined plates upon yet more spinning plates, balanced precariously above one’s head, wondering how to gracefully retain control? Or was it like looking into a blizzard where information, matter and ideas swirled blindingly, obscuring the way ahead? Neither scenario described the process as well as the image of Orbits that I have returned to. The term ‘Orbits’ gives a sense of the precarious nature of an idea as it becomes evident, being steered through a space of limitless potential. Its journey is influenced by the presence of many orbits created by powerful and often conflicting entities, which push and pull it, propelling the idea forward on its safe passage into the unknown future.

The diagrams illustrated here have the capacity to act as a tool, setting out the whole body of research as visual chapters. In this catalogue, each chapter has a starting point as an orbit diagram that expands to include elements requiring further detailed investigation and explanation. At the same time, each capture my research modus operandi.

Orbits and Trajectories best describes the nature of the relationships that underscore the overarching findings in my PhD, and individual discoveries within it. As “Orbit Diagrams” they offer a non-linear, spatial way to navigate issues and mutual encounters. They help to explain how actions coalesce to become acts of authorship – and how this operates within a creative, collaborative practice.

This sense of push-pull is also embodied in the architecture that DSDHA makes and which, for the purpose of this study, has been termed ‘awkward’. In the past it has been described by others as “dynamic instability”. We now confidently consider this quality to be a new form of beauty. It is designed to create a response, to be responsive, and to engage the wider world with architecture.

When we speak of beauty here, it is not in the usual manner of acknowledged design systems that assess how well a design conforms to set rules. Our search is for a ‘New Beauty’: there are no fixed proportional or material systems at play; there is no pattern book or set of principles to follow.

Instead, our new idea of beauty is defined

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5 Originally these were done with PowerPoint. See Appendix for Practice Research Symposium (PRS) Sheets.
6 This methodology is shared with the world of teaching in schools of architecture where the Pin-Up is key.
Searching for New Beauty: Orbits and Trajectories

Olympic Village model making

Learning on the job: DSDHA site visit to Snowsfields
by an emergent aesthetic enquiry. Its qualities are about demonstrating certain attributes of the work through the work. New Beauty is active, rather than passive and is about creating work that allows the viewer to see it in a way that causes them to feel slightly interrogated, or provoked. The New Beauty that we are seeking creates a situation where the subject – the architecture – is actually answering back and raising questions in the viewer’s mind. This active mode of reception brings with it a kind of delight or moment of illumination for the viewer, even if this response occurs after an initial sense of confusion or feeling perplexed.

The immediate sense of awkwardness or confusion can be created through a range of architectural choices. It can be based on a cultural disjuncture – for example, a place or building that challenges one’s preconceptions of what occurs inside it. The John Perry nursery illustrates this: a place for the care of small children is contained in a building that has a scale and material use more often associated with industrial structures. Similarly, New Beauty can appear through unexpected structural choices, where architecture seems to be imbalanced or unsteady. Both the over-stated gesture of the cantilever at John Perry Nursery and the toppling form of Alex Monroe’s Studio articulate this kind of surprise.

Material uncertainty is the other way that New Beauty is expressed in our work. In this regard it is seen where materials of uncertain or unusual origins are used, such as the burned cladding of timber at Potter’s Fields Park, or the sparsely economic yet rich finishes at Christ’s College, which hold emotion and local resonance.

Our work is concerned with interrogating such contradictions, ethical conditions and consequences, and we find richness in designing our work to challenge the usual way of apprehending these situations; discovering what happens when collisions occur and events and choices are made.

As such, architecture is a fitting discipline for us to work in as it embodies the perfect contradiction: it is solid, three-dimensional but best understood through movement; it is experienced as ever-changing yet endures and persists over time; it entails physicality and matter – it is ‘made’ – yet it is irreconcilably connected to people, emotions, beliefs. Above all, architecture is shaped by values and cultural choices.

The architecture of DSDHA aims to balance these extremes in some way, without pretending that imbalances do not exist. It is an architecture that answers back and is an act of communication that perhaps declares our endeavour to contribute in small ways to making the conditions of being here, right now, as good as they can possibly be; in other words, to participate.

Ultimately, this study is about optimistically restating the aims of architecture and explaining why architecture must never stand still.
Learning on the job: DSDHA site visit to Snowsfields to meet zinc workers, with photographer Dennis Gilbert
Introduction

Designing our own way of working: reviewing everyone’s ideas at a design charette for the new studio
Searching for New Beauty: Orbits and Trajectories
DSDHA is based in London. We are architects and we are also urban designers. In fact we undertake many different aspects of architecture. We are currently a studio of about 20 people, sometimes more, sometimes less. We do not have fixed expectations of our output in terms of programme or confine our involvement to a particular scale, although we do have ambitions to keep evolving. We want every day to be different, to keep learning. We design significant buildings or small public spaces (and vice versa), hold participatory events, make installations in art galleries and create city plans. In fact we design anything to do with the use or creation of a space that is caught between necessity and desire. We teach and foster talent, write, and share our thoughts about architecture with the public. Our intention is to open up the world of architecture and invite people in.

A good place to start is to ask why we find ourselves practicing in this way. In essence, it is about looking at the values that underscore our way of working as a studio, asking what frames our own studio’s aims for the future. Robin Evans said that any gathering of people creates its own "institution", with its own personality and opportunities for encounter. We ask how we might bring a consciousness to reveal the culture and personality of DSDHA and recognise its potential as a point of exchange.

Chapter 1

1 We currently run a Postgraduate Design Studio, at The Cass School of Architecture. See Appendix for more details.
2 Robin Evans taught me briefly during the final year of my diploma at Cambridge University.
own client projects

City thinking

Architect as building

Research

Teaching

Situated w. our contemporaries

Giving opinions

Running a studio

Because this is what we do...

Questioning the role of being an architect

A book + a PhD
Chapter 1

Christ’s College and Pond Meadow School

Olympic Village

Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens

South Molton Street Building

Tickle Cock Bridge

DSDHA’s DFL Future London submission
Inside/adjacent/outside
→ see next spread
Not a neat fit
We don’t fit a neatly defined category of architect; we like to be constantly changing. We simultaneously question preconceptions and embrace the inherent contradictions of what an architect should or could be.

We are caught between the sophistication of intellectual discourse, the dust and dangers of site construction, all the while searching for new forms of beauty and quality of experience. Equally we face the harsh constraints of cost and procurement control, as well as balancing the everyday demands of being an entrepreneur and running a business. We teach, judge, broadcast, debate, give speeches, write and at this moment, are building our own projects, too.

Never the same thing twice
Perhaps most of all, we like to keep changing and not be typecast; just as we like our buildings to differ as well. My diagram shows this chameleon-like ability to be considered part of one group while appearing to be part of another at the same time. This can be seen in how we juggle between roles of teacher, developer, heritage expert, architect of fine small buildings and large, commercial, commissions or public works. Based on our research, it seems that few of our contemporaries demonstrate this trait of shape-shifting quite as much as we do. Few of them appear to be engaged in a discourse about beauty, even though we appear in the same beauty parades.

In terms of where we have been placed in relation to our contemporaries, surveys of published compilations or "The Best of ..." lists demonstrates our pattern of shifting identities, or of us having a quality that is hard to turn down.

We are rarely grouped with the same selection of practices more than once or twice, we don’t seem to come from a 'school' or are bracketed under a defined 'style', and we have neither generational, nor regional traits that strictly combine us with others. We do not stick to any particular sector or display one type of identifiable behaviour as an architect, such as seeking 'starchitect' status or demanding that we grow exponentially as an illustration of success. We are never the same architect twice.

The In-Crowd?
When considering the 'selective' groups in which others have (or have not) included us between 2003 and 2013, the diversity is enormous. It demonstrates our span across the culture of architecture. We are included in Lucy Bullivant’s Anglo Files but not her subsequent New Arcadians; we were selected for The Architect Journal’s ‘40 under 40’ but not for its Young Architect of the Year; we were included as the youngest firm of architects on The Architecture Foundation’s Olympic Village shortlist of over 300 entries. We were not selected for Design For London’s framework, despite the fact that our submission greeted guests at the entrance to their offices and was included in their Shanghai Pavilion exhibition at the World Expo. Based on this analysis, there is inconsistency in how our studio is perceived, though any omission from what might be seen as the 'in crowd' does not give us cause for complaint. We have been fortunate to be included in various top architect lists, such as The Times “Young Turks” or its "Best British Architects". We have been shortlisted for both The Stirling Prize and BD’s Architect of the Year.

A social landscape
We do feel justifiably confident in being identified as part of a broader group when we have been bracketed with others who like to participate in public discourse on architecture. We acknowledge its importance beyond the notion of a technical landscape, or as a profession exclusively concerned

3 Heraclitus - "No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it’s not the same river and he’s not the same man."
4 See Appendix for ‘In Crowd’ list.
5 Bullivant, Lucy. Anglo Files: UK architecture’s rising generation, 2005.
with buildings. We win competitions by thinking about issues in a fresh way. This is seen in our Designs on Democracy or Cabe’s Neighbourhood Nurseries in which architecture can be considered more as part of a social landscape that we all live in.

**Learn something new every day**

The other common identity we value is working with those who share an active interest in teaching, discovering and passing on knowledge for the future, as well as effecting change. For example, we hold shared values and emergent discussions with our Cass teaching companions such as David Kohn, Tony Fretton and Florian Beigel. We are also part of a community of practitioners who believe in the importance of teaching and practicing architecture, such as 6a Architects, who have held invited professorships in Switzerland. There, a didactic tradition continues that recognises architects who practice as key participants in teaching architecture. Accordingly, funding is generously given to support this cross-fertilisation of ideas.

**Part of a tradition, but not a way of life**

Before reflecting on our practice, we were aware of our interests in social spheres but it was Jonathan Glancey8 who helpfully pointed this out – though we were perhaps not then in a position to really appreciate it. He wrote, “they [DSDHA] might not know it but they follow in the tradition of Alison and Peter Smithson of creating socially minded architecture.” When we read this, David Hills and I were flattered and a little unnerved. It was doubtless significant to be placed alongside a pair of our own heroes. The Smithsons were champions of the New Brutalism, part of a grand British tradition based on modernity and democracy. We felt especially fortunate as none of our contemporaries on that particular list were held so high. Equally, we were irked to be referred to as a ‘husband and wife team’. To be seen explicitly as a partnership based on marital status seemed inappropriate. We never refer to ourselves in this way. We want to be known for our work and our ideas, not our personal partnership.

This minor niggle triggered a question that was then unspoken, though obvious, and was something that this PhD allowed partial investigation of: Is partnership important? It prompted questions about the common values and ambitions that we share and the potential company we might keep in terms of a community of practice. If there is a way to unfathom the role of partnership, could we begin to try to reveal what anyone’s gender or private life might have to do with it?

**The personal and the public**

In any endeavour the relationship between the public and private self is complex. To reach a point where I can enjoy reviewing over a decade of running my own practice with David Hills, I have had to make many decisions but also had to follow my instincts. I think it is important to distinguish between these two actions and allow each to be considered in more detail.

**Decisions**

For a woman practicing in architecture the relationship between public and private self is perhaps doubly complicated. Not only do you need self-determination driving you on or self-doubt bringing you to an abrupt halt when things are not working, you also have the weight of an inglorious tradition on your shoulders in the form of inequality. In a highly selective profession, where merit and quality are meant to be the benchmarks that differentiate between good and bad architecture, inequality is a tough issue. There are simply not enough women involved in architecture. They decide, quite reasonably, against it.

The culture of architecture is much the same as in the Houses of Parliament, which struggles to find women who will tolerate its culture and the working conditions it offers in order to sit on the benches and participate in democracy. Architecture has a similar challenge to persuade women that it is worth trying to enter and stay in the extraordinary

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Chapter 1

Laying bricks with my grandfather and sister on holiday

Busy, Busy World

The Australian Ugliness

Considering an alternative career path at a birthday party

Entryways and Front Gardens

My childhood home in Nairobi, Kenya
world of making architecture. That there is value in designing the very spaces that we occupy; setting down the cities of the future while caring about the detail of a door handle – all the while considering the ecological balance between ‘manmade’ and nature. Architecture is a great world to be part of, but it is aggressive and combative. In Britain, it is a world that would-be inheritors of a post-colonial empire might decide to re-entrench ... It smacks of the militaristic, bombastic behaviour of a professional and highly educated cadre playing at warfare to get things built. To bring about better architecture in the face of enormous, sometimes ferocious, opposition is literally like being part of a campaign. In the original sense of the word, it is like battling to make progress and to ultimately hope to win the war. Architecture is not a walk in the park. It sometimes goes without saying that you have to have ‘the balls’ to stomach it.

I want these conditions to change. I want more fantastic designers, more brilliant thinkers to join the profession. The fact that “women hold up half of the sky” means we have to demand that they are included. I want more women and those from other under-represented groups to decide to become architects and to keep making decisions to remain strong in that aim.

Instincts
As a female architect, being part of a creative discipline is a joy. Working with other men and women to achieve great feats is a feeling second to none. I have wanted to be an architect ever since I knew what the word meant. In fact, I think I wanted to be some kind of builder from the very beginning – just as every child does. Given building blocks or a den-like space every child will play at making their own form of architecture. This is an innate desire we all share – even when we grow up and cast aside ‘foolish things’. Our adult selves overshadow our sense of play and delight, making us forget that it is fun to be part of making shelter.

We must try retain this connection with creativity that is in all of us; we can dig deep and call upon those memories to remind ourselves of why we do it.

I believe everyone should be able to participate – as long as they care passionately about quality and beauty.

Influences on a future architect
Preliminary research for the PhD was undertaken to uncover early influences and interests that helped to shape my sensibilities and spatial intelligence. These ranged from the experience of hands-on building, where I would make my own small houses with one of my grandfathers who was a bricklayer in Cornwall, to navigating Sydney Harbour past Utzon’s Opera House with my other grandfather on his boat. I also wondered at what thwarted ambitions my grandmothers may have had too, without the constraints under which they lived nearly a century ago.

As a dyslexic child I only read books with pictures, so I spent hours absorbing the minute detail of Richard Scarry’s hand-drawn illustrations that sliced through the complexity of everyday life in *[Busy, Busy World]*. Later, while studying in America, I marvelled at Venturi, Scott–Brown and Izenor’s revelation of *Learning from Las Vegas*, which declared the normal stuff of daily life – the “mechanics of existence” – was relevant and deserved enquiry, even if no one at my UK architecture school seemed to then agree.

This reflection on my education led to reading Venturi’s *Complexity and Contradiction* and later Robin Boyd’s *The Australian Ugliness*. These influences taught me as an architect-in-waiting that as long as you knew what the rules were, they were

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DSDHA are not:
MUF / FAT / AOC
Caruso St John / Sergison Bates
AHMM / DRMM / Adjaye

---

DSDHA feel connected to:
Tony Fretton / A+P Smithson
Alvaro Siza

---

Gigon Guyer? / Lacaton Vassal?
Barkow Leibinger?

April 2011: Version 1 Community of Practice

Speaking out about design quality at the Royal Academy, July 2011
there to be broken. Your own territory of design was open to interrogation.

These scholarly influences can be read alongside the subliminal influences of growing up in Australia, then Kenya, and then the UK. Startlingly obvious in retrospect, my parents had a great love of modern American design. I was surrounded by extraordinary images of Californian architecture and landscape design that merged indoors and out. Much like my verandah-based early years, these pictures recalled hours spent relishing the Technicolor optimism and way of life set out in National Geographic journal adverts, which must have had a marked effect on a small girl in 1970s Britain.

Baroque gardens and shopping malls
Is it a coincidence that other disciplines enter the frame in this overview of influences? Unstitching their effect on our architecture reveals a back catalogue of trajectories. These include the origins of DSDHA’s fascination with landscape; the perception of public space and hierarchy; infrastructure and Baroque gardens; a determination to understand the motivations that underscore popular appeal and consequent urban behaviours of places such as shopping malls, theme parks and edge city conditions, despite the traditional architect’s contention that such areas of enquiry were irrelevant.

A discourse on beauty
In reflecting on what we do there are key questions that, until recently, I would have found hard to pin down: What is the beauty that some people recognise in our work, from Potters Fields’ Park Pavilions to Tickle Cock Bridge, our Olympic Village Housing, or our installation for Hermès on Bond Street? What can we make of our newest work and emergent ways of working?

14 From Vaux-le-Vicomte to Versailles, the landscape work of Le Notre is of particular interest. Set against a dynamic socio-economic and political backdrop, the infrastructural scale and the detailed complexity of the designs is inspiring in its breadth and ambition. See Building Design feature, “Deborah Saunt and David Hills on the Gardens of Versailles,” 1 April 2010.
15 In one particular remark at the University of Cambridge 1999. Dalibor Vessely asked how we could research Silvertown when “there is nothing there”.

DSDHA: Research findings on social behaviours in shopping malls

mobility = wealth:
This lady works at the mall. She commutes 90km each way: 900km per week.
On her day off she returns to the mall with her husband.

37
Chapter 1

Student project: Group model, Easytown/Luton

Student project: Edward Blake, Future Soho
as this study takes place? What does The South Molton Street Building or Alex Monroe’s Studio on Snowfields in the shadow of The Shard really mean? How do we assess an urban framework plan as compared to a temporary student installation? All of these questions are an essential part of what we do as architects.

Our reputation allows us to be many things at once, but ultimately we are united by a demand to achieve the highest possible quality in terms of both delivery and design.

An initial overview of qualities in the work
As a way of assessing our community of practice and reviewing the defined group/s in which critics would placed us, we considered what qualities were discernable in our work in a series of profiles on DSDHA. These included Lucy Bullivant’s Anglo Files,\(^{16}\) Helen Castle’s

\(^{16}\) Ibid.
\(^{18}\) Diamond, Rosamund. "Dynamische Collagen" in Werk, Bauen + Wohnen March 2010. This in-depth practice profile is an accolade accorded to only one other UK practice, Sergison Bates, several years before us..
[The projects] engender a tension generated by a technique of overlaying scales with formal references.

Narratives of space and materials in the wider context of [their] urban conditions [Between] personal inhabitation and collective society.

Their work is not easy to categorise, aspects of their methodology are discernible… their buildings do not fit into an obvious pattern.

In the context of the post-picturesque, post-industrial UK in which definitions of what is beautiful are confused between landscape and development, the strongest of this work becomes heroic in its polemic instability.”

Observations on the work of DSDHA by Ros Diamond
The unpredictability of individual behaviours becomes a positive attribute in their urban designs.

Complex relationships are portrayed using layering techniques, in which the surroundings are rendered unfamiliar through transpositions of material and scale, condensing urban experience.

They seek to encourage civic behaviour through encounter.

Through their construction and handling, buildings are never divested of their usefulness, and acknowledge social context, or what de Waal refers to as the distinction between "something being site-specific and something being site-sensitive."

Observations on the work of DSDHA by Ros Diamond
In DSDHA’s work unpredictability is used as a positive constituent of design, to denote how it will inevitably change in use.

DSDHA use familiar materials in unconventional fashions.

This unnerving quality, the result of what at times appears a somewhat reckless risk taking is crucial to their understanding.

This approach to social engagement [as] a conceptual focus has a parallel strategy on its fabrication, in which individuals’ hands in crafting and use are critical.
AD Practice Profile and Ros Diamond’s feature in the Swiss publication Werk Bauen + Wohnen.

By focusing on Ros Diamond’s feature, which is the most recent profile of our studio, some profound insights into the thematic interests of the studio were offered as tools to understand our work, and how it is perceived. Alongside project illustrations, these are worthy of citation. (See pp. 40–42)

From this review I made a list of possible themes that may be core to understanding our work. These are set out below and are reflected upon in Chapter 2:

1. Every project is different
2. City edge location
3. Civic consolidation
4. Individual + collective
5. Free standing activator
6. Unstable/unsettling form
7. Contextual narrative
8. Unprogrammed + functional
9. Materiality + making
10. Layering + Collage
11. Incomplete

Beyond these themes identified by Ros Diamond, through the process of reviews on our work, there is a further category of Art which has made an unexpected entry into my findings. This is the relationship between art and architecture. This category introduces a critical conversation about a key (previously unacknowledged) component of design: namely, authorship within DSDHA. In terms of the practice’s design methodology, we had previously perceived and set out (see illustration Design Methodology, 2005) a bespoke ‘way of doing things’. We had even tried to draw our collaborative process to illustrate ‘a project sheet’s role within DSDHA's overall goals’. The clearly articulated sequence that passed through set development stages and testing via a series of design reviews (which I chaired) was summarised in a document that was developed to help new DSDHA members understand our design process. The document did not describe an outcome, but specifically the process of design.

In 2011, this original 2005 investigation was used to discover aspects of where, when, and how I influence the design from inception to eventual release.

The diagram briefly mentions the prerequisite values and errors that underscore the work but I had not tried to illustrate how they were drawn into the work – in both

Themes:
- Every project is different
- City edge location
- Civic consolidation
- Individual + collective
- Free standing activator
- Unstable/unsettling form
- Contextual narrative
- Unprogrammed + functional
- Materiality + making
- Layering + Collage
- Incomplete

“Trying to extract the themes present in our work”
Chapter 1

senses of the word – or how our aesthetic judgement was actually generated. Why do our buildings look the way they do? How do we decide when a project looks ‘right’, even if it might appear a little unfamiliar or odd to an outsider?

Badly done on purpose

The work of Ed Ruscha has been an anchor for this research since discovering a connection that came from a Ruscha reference: an image of his Standard Gasoline Station\textsuperscript{19} juxtaposed with our John Perry Nursery and Children’s Centre.

The revelation of this juxtaposition goes beyond the clear visual similarities between what we appear to be doing. Links to the way his work recognised a new, then invalidated form of beauty that resided in forms of contemporary cultural production – roadside architecture, for example, in this case.

Ruscha’s work asks you to take another, very careful look at everyday, often overlooked phenomena to reveal deeper responses.

This observation of hidden beauty has a specific resonance with the authored forms of DSDHA. They, too, ask you to reconsider what you are looking at – to look anew.

In Ruscha’s 1966 work, “Badly Done on Purpose,” he explicitly posits the notion of something being ‘badly done on purpose’. His intent is not purely expressive or representational; he is seeking to provoke or agitate the viewer and thus create a specific unsettling response. It is through Ruscha’s self-awareness that the viewer can become conscious of the way they are looking at, and of the subject of their gaze.

In other words, the work encourages them to look and feel awkward.

\textsuperscript{19} Ed Ruscha, ”Standard Gasoline Station”, 1966.
Design Methodology, 2005
→ see next spread
**Design Methodology**

A + B

**History of Site**

Environmental Constraints/Oppportunities

Movement + View Analysis from Site Visit

Brief Analysis (Areas, Adjacency)

Demographics/Social Engagement of Local Issues

Amenities/Infrastructure Urban Materiality + Topologies

**Drivers**

- Futures
- Values
- Vision
- Goals

Assess projects role within overall DSDHA goals for future developments.

- Economics
- Urban ambitions
- Social ambitions
- Material investigations
- Typology
- Interiority/values 'personality' of project

NEW IDEAS?
Design Methodology, 2005

TIME
E F G H J K

DR
NO
GOOD
RETRY
STEPS

DR
DR
DR
DR

1 2 3 4 5

2

3

1 2 3

1 2 3

1 2 3

5

DR

TECHNICAL INNOVATION?

BIGGER LESSONS LEARNT?

LEARNING FROM MISTAKES?

WHEN WE EXPLAIN THE PROJECT DO WE STILL ADDRESS GOALS?
OR HAVE WE LEARNT NEW THINGS + RECORDED OUR DISCOVERIES + THE RESULTS OF OUR RESEARCH?
Drawing Back To Look Forward: Why Reflect On One’s Practice?


John Perry Nursery and Children’s Centre
Orbits and Scores

Early investigations reflecting on the background influences and interests of DSDHA included simultaneous studies that tried to uncover the themes, issues and methods of design. The orbit diagram for this chapter sets out the qualities found in the body of work after further enquiry. This process revealed how each of these qualities overlaps and influences each other, in an orbit-like fashion, affecting both what we design and how we go about designing it.

Trying to score The Work

Having tried to distil general characteristics evident in our work¹ in the previous chapter, an assessment was devised to make a calibrated overview in a more comparative way. Several different gauges were plotted. They enabled a direct comparison of the way in which projects reflected five specific issues, which derived from the first assessment of characteristics revealed in the previous chapter. The condensed categories were:

- City/Social
- Garden/Verandah/Hybrid
- Environmental
- Awkward
- Material Issues

¹ See Archive for full list of DSDHA projects analysed in the PhD.
Interrogating The Evidence In The Work We Make
It was clear that the city/social sensibility recurred in our projects and has been recognised within our own practice’s design methodology\(^2\) as well as by outside critics and other architects\(^3\).

An example of this would be at Guildford, where we created more than an educational campus by focusing on the urban impact of the scheme. This generated wider social benefits for local people who had effectively become land-locked by the site due to the original planning of the area. We designed a new roadway and cycle path though the site to allow public ease of movement and complimented this with a nascent public space that established a sense of shared community where paths were designed to intersect and where pupils from different schools would see each other, along with local people passing by.

So many of our projects seem to demonstrate a preoccupation with blurring the threshold between inside and out. These projects offer unfettered access to nature and a direct engagement with the outside world, or allow the building to recede in the background after initially signalling to and welcoming in visitors.

At St Anne’s Sure Start in Colchester, glazed walls at each end of the entrance lobby admit transparency and connect the institution to the Heath landscape internally. At John Perry Nursery a tremendous projecting verandah is created by an 8m cantilevered canopy, which allows children unrestricted play below it in all weathers as they run inside and out.

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\(^2\) See Case Studies for illustration of design methodology themes.

\(^3\) In 2004, unexpectedly and with little proven urban design expertise other than through teaching, Foster + Partners invited DSDHA to join their winning team to redesign Parliament Square. Commissioned by the Mayor of London, DSDHA was to bring a ‘fresh approach’ to the project.
Likewise, examples of our work make evident our aims for an economy of means, for acting responsibly and responsively in assessing opportunities to push for architecture that performs well.

We use as few materials as possible, such as at Paradise Park where we supported innovation by working with designers of the UK’s first green wall, using recycled rainwater from the building and including brown roof technology. At the Olympic Village Housing, balconies reduce in scale towards the base of the building while windows increase in size to improve daylighting for residents when the area is further densified.

What is the unique quality of awkwardness in our work? This quality can engage the user or passerby in an arresting way that is not always immediately evident. What is it that we are searching for in our aesthetic, which asks you to “take three steps forward and look back”? What is the purpose of the double-take or the unnerving sensation of awkwardness as a form of engagement with our work?

An example of this quality would be the monumental brick-clad projections over the Early Years play areas at Pond Meadow School in Guildford. These over-sized walls create tension between the scale and apparent weight of the canopy, and the space for small children to play below. Similarly, awkward are the jagged cliff-like elevations of the Olympic Village Housing, which recall buried geology in a flat landscape. Even at William Bellamy School the severe ‘industrial’ architecture that greets the street is scaleless and appears three or four storeys tall but is only a building of two floors, for children. In fact, once inside, the project generates environments that are more akin to domestic interiors.

Because a work is unusual or appears out of place, does this mean it is ugly? Perhaps the public imagination is not quite ready for it?

Material Issues

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4 See Archive for full list of DSDHA projects.
We researched burnt timber in the UK and even appointed TRADA (The Timber Research and Development Association) for research advice on the potential issues of the process, as no literature seem to exist on the subject. TRADA came back with no examples or information about any precedent although they helped develop a specification clause for controlled burning. Once the building was on site, I serendipitously made the connection in Venice with the work of Terunobu Fujimori. I have since discovered that the product is available for sale on the Internet with different grades of charring.

Why do we seek not only emotional resonance in the materiality or ‘made-ness’ of our projects, but also demand that we limit the number of materials used on a project wherever possible?

Why create, from first principles, a new type of burned timber cladding for our Potters’ Fields Park? The project was the first building in the UK to use this technique. We determined it was one way to create a connection to the wartime Blitz attacks on the site, which are no longer evident in the new glass and steel architecture of More London. Later, we discovered first-hand that the burnt timber technique echoes that used in Japan for millenia and is known as Yakisugi.⁶
Test 1:
Assessing Overall Characteristics, Over Time

Each project was scored against criteria organised on a vertical scale from high to low: + (very good) to – (not performing well). Each category was coded with a different line weight, noted on the side of the graph.

The selection of projects was arranged at the base of the graph, their titles written vertically in a chronological order, side by side. The sample began from our earliest published and award-winning building of Plovers Hill Orangery on the left through to our Stirling-shortlisted Christ’s College, and some of our current unbuilt projects on the right.

The graph is initially confusing to read as individual projects are obliterated so that only a general set of trends emerge.

Different tones were ascribed to each of the five rated characteristics in an effort to trace the evolving progress of these issues in time. Different projects may push or pull its overall trajectory. For example, Criterion 3) for Environmental Awareness oscillates between high-performing and average whereas Criterion 1), 4) and 5) (City, Awkward and Material) span from high to low over the past 10 years.

After preliminary scoring it was clear that certain key questions arose. These are summarised below:

— Do the projects become consistently, better, or more average? More convergent in characteristics but less extreme?

— Where there is an abundance of high scores, is it that ‘rules’ or preconceived expectations have been challenged, and therefore a boundary is breached or new territory claimed?

— Have any categories become less prevalent or more extreme? For example, Awkward is less evident in later work.

— What has improved? City, Hybrid, Material?

— What remains to be addressed? Why does recent work appear to be more average where grading is mainly 3–4?

Control

If any tendency could be discerned, it was a sense that ‘control’ of the projects was getting stronger and therefore fewer extremely high or low scores in different categories would happen within the same project.

Conversely, in losing the extreme oscillation demonstrated within earlier projects, where a group of projects had been scored as high performing (between Potters’ Fields Park and The Silver Building), did it seem as if more recent projects were becoming ‘middle of the road’, less extreme, more comfortable and maybe less critical? Was our output tailing off, with scores sitting across the board in the mid-range for all qualities?

Early projects

Does the oscillation within individual scores evidence the inexperienced designer trying to get to grips with the complexity of making real architecture? Or does it demonstrate the search to find one’s own voice or way of working?

Core values

A key finding is made evident by the addition of a dashed line on projects. These show, quite by accident, how our specifically urban projects demonstrate the capacity for any type of work to be equally relevant to, and an integral part of, our practice, thereby demonstrating the same core values. Regrettably, there are only two projects shown as I was then unsure of how to evaluate an urban proposition or a temporary installation alongside a built project.

In fact our awareness of these qualities has grown ever since we started a conscious design review culture in the studio, through which we constantly reflect on what it is that we do. This is demonstrated in the drawing "Awareness of Qualities Over Time" that I drew at the same time as the graph, which assesses all of the strands of awareness each project has since we established the studio.

For example, social awareness has never diminished but a consciousness of materials has steadily increased and matured. These seem to be core values that underscore all that we do.
Immediately after completing this first test, it felt necessary to ask where were the qualities so admired in architecture, of clarity and ‘synthesis’; of uncompromised ‘holistic beauty’? Why was I not scoring this aspect of how others might read the work? How could sense be made of the most recent unbuilt projects, which felt as though they were becoming mediocre compared to early work? Was this really a sign of incipient decline?

In the margins, I tentatively asked another question: “Is this a new category?” Beside the question I wrote ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’ and then ‘Control’. This new category is now added as 6) Clarity.

An example of this quality would be our very first project, Plovers Hills Orangery, where we controlled every detail with equal design conviction and persistence; or Pond Meadow School where the same degree of control and integrity operated but on a much larger project. For each project, clear rules were established and followed.

A reworked single line graph appears beneath the list of projects – a delicate upbeat journey that demonstrates evidence of this quality, apart from one dramatic drop towards the end. This is a recent project, Covert House, which appears to be failing to achieve the expected quality of Clarity.

I asked, why there was an odd spike in our performance? To try to understand the reasons I immediately tested some new categorisations. What appear to be the ‘best projects’? What is the ‘best scale’ of project that performs highly? What are the correlations?

I graded all of the projects, from very good to poor, based on the results:

A: Very Good
— Potters’ Fields Park
— The Silver Building
— Guilford Schools
— Olympic Village

B: Good
— St Anne’s Sure Start, Colchester
— William Bellamy School
— Tickle Cock Bridge
— John Perry Nursery and Children’s Centre

C: Medium
— The Møller Centre
— South Molton Street Building
— Abell and Cleland
— Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens
— City Forum
— Shepherds Bush Hotel
— Corbridge Crescent

D: Poor
— Covert House

Judgment
Were the high-scoring projects really our best work? What was happening to create this effect? And how can you really judge good work, when some of the better projects never won prizes or awards, while other lower-scoring poorer projects did?

Why did some very good projects provoke a negative reaction when judged by our peers yet appear to be newsworthy with audiences around the world, gaining global coverage?

What is the definition of a failing project after all? And why does the lowest scoring project of all – Covert House – happen to be a project of some significance, and in the latter stage of design. Being the architect’s own house, is it really such an awful project?
Awareness of Qualities Over Time
→ see next spread
Awareness of Qualities Over Time

Do the projects become consistently better? Of more average?

Where there is an abundance of high scores, is it that the "rules," the average, preconceived expectations have been challenged, and a boundary breach/new territory claimed?

Have any categories become less prevalent - automated is less evident?

What has improved? City, hybrid, ev

What remains to be addressed? Why so average how? 3-4
Personal
Reviewing how much personal effort has gone into the Covert House project, which I initiated and have driven forward for many years, questions had to be asked:

Is the matrix of categories correct, and should it be revised to be more sophisticated to absorb the complex qualities of our work? Is the scoring evidence of self-doubt, perhaps, or of ongoing questioning so that an incomplete project can never confidently score highly?

Or, is the issue to do with confronting the threshold between the way one’s personal work evolves alongside the work we make collaboratively in the studio?

Is it worth considering the relationship that exists between the role I adopt in the studio, and my individual behaviour?

On reflection, I realised a key difference between this ‘private project’ and the other projects is that it has not been part of the studio so far. Therefore it has not followed the same sequence of iterations and testing that we use to create architecture at DSDHA. Can its exceptional status, literally as a Covert House, act as a useful foil to unfold the values and processes at play within the studio?

Case Study of The Covert House
A separate case study of The Covert House was made. It attempted to interrogate and focus on how a project unfolds thematically; to illustrate the values that inform our Studio ethos; and to understand how that process evolves at a micro scale. It was a test to see if the perceived grander themes and values I had outlined really do underscore work by DSDHA, and to check if the discoveries from this PhD were verifiable.
Test 2:  
Using Four Criteria to Assess Each Project

With the work of Edward Tufte in mind, and aware of how subjective the use of data can be, I realised a more accurate tool was required to demonstrate my reflective practice. I needed to find something that was specific to each project, not generalised as the first test had been. I was interested in the traits the earlier test showed over time but I needed to be more specific about what I wanted to reveal. I wanted to use comparative analysis for projects but to ensure each could be read independently, not just as part of a demonstrable trend within a body of work.

This triggered the idea of using a matrix, which would offer another way to measure project performances individually, but also allowed for the work to be read as a whole.

Initially, I used only four grading criteria:

- CITY
- GARDEN
- ENVIRONMENT
- AWKWARD

I removed Material and Clarity to keep the graphic presentation very simple.

The resulting diagrams are immediately more legible and benefit from a project image next to the graph, which strengthened the visual communication.

The quadrangle makes the results seem rather limited and easily skewed. The subtlety and depth of each project’s character was not properly illustrated. Why is a popular project not conveyed as such in the diagram? Why does its success in use, or perceived beauty not register?
3
On reflection I asked if this method would become more sophisticated if it were able to simultaneously make manifest a factor of criteria larger than the original five or six.

**Test 3:**
*Using Eight Criteria to Assess Each Project*

This led to a matrix of eight factors. The categories tested here comprise those of the previous tests but include two new categories; focusing on how others judged the projects, too.

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**Recognition**

The category of 'Recognition' takes into account other people's opinions of the projects as a means to access objectivity; as if seeing the work through a different lens. As a regular judge of work in a public role, Recognition was a category that simply recorded if a project had won accolades in a formal judging process. In this case, it was based on the number of RIBA awards we had won, as that process was considered a thorough and professionally-based assessment.

When we had just begun DSDHA, I had originally been astounded when we won so many RIBA awards. I had often wondered why some of these were, in my opinion, not necessarily for the best projects of all. Why did some of the projects I’d identified as ‘best overall’ not necessarily win RIBA Awards, even though they had independently and anecdotally received more positive reactions in terms of media coverage?  

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**Appeal**

To that end, the category 'Appeal', meaning *mass appeal*, was included as assessment criteria to test whether it generated a more helpful angle on a project.

The resulting grid of kite-like diagrams again shows lopsided projects or projects with only a very limited impact, whilst the ‘successful’ projects filled nearly all of the respective available fields. Projects in design development that were considered problematic or of concern are clearly visible, as they appear small or lop-sided. Again, the Covert House project is deformed, unbalanced and minimal in terms of scales of success. In fact, all projects ‘in development’ are always asymmetric.

The reason for this bias could be dependent on a number of factors: Is it that when one is

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8 See Appendix for judging experience.
9 See Appendix for DSDHA RIBA-winning project awards.
10 For example, Tickle Cock Bridge, Paradise Park Children’s Centre, St Anne’s Colchester.
in the thick of a project it is hard to gain an overall perspective of where a project is or how well it is performing? Or is it that the qualities of projects which are incomplete or unbuilt are less legible as they are manifest only in drawings as projections of a future condition?

A Contradictory Line
It is worth explaining why there are two line weights shown on the diagrams – one solid, one dashed. The latter dashed line represents scoring with all eight criteria in play; the former solid line shows the first four criteria tested in the earlier analysis. By showing both assessments on top of the other, it is clearly evident that more, rather than fewer criteria, is helpful. It also expresses fully the inherent challenging and contradictory nature of our projects.

An outsider assessment
To double-check whether these criteria, or ‘Design Values’ persist in all of our work, the criteria were interrogated further.

The scoring in both “Test 1: Assessing Overall Characteristics Over Time” and “Awareness of Qualities Over Time” is a very useful tool in demonstrating the positive value of unbuilt work or competition entries that cannot yet be experienced, but include the thematic traits of all of our output.

The incomplete
Projects that were incomplete at the time, such as The Silver Building or The South Molton Street Building, are yet to be professionally assessed via awards but have already gained much interest in the press so they have high scores for appeal. At the time of writing, one can see how passing time and a rising profile of a project would affect the scores today. For example, the South Molton Street Building is frequently shortlisted but has not won an industry award. It is interesting that this type of architecture, being hard to pin down or assess formally, has a quality that has led directly to the use of the term ‘awkward,’ and has helped develop the search for new beauty through this thesis.

Knowing awkwardness
It is also worth considering if a contention of mine is true, namely, if a project has not been reviewed in the press it seems less likely to receive an award. This reinforces the notion that the cultural significance accorded to work is likely to be more favourable if the judges have a prop on which to lean when it comes to shaping their own opinions, so they might utilise someone else’s point of view to aid their own judgement. It appears that when projects have already been judged as ‘acceptable’ in the press, this stamp of approval has a manifest effect on how some challenging work is received.

Jolie laide: unconventional beauty
It is as if the effect of awkwardness, the quality of something being so unfamiliar or out of place that it could be termed “ugly” or “a bit severe,” can initially cause a negative reaction, but given time and reflection, the reaction shifts. At times ‘awkwardness’ can even look accidental, disturbing or disruptive. The shift from negative to positive reaction is a cultural reading and is not formed from any inherent aesthetic reason. It is like the juxtaposition of Greek and Roman statues: one is aestheticised to the point of an almost impossibly perfect beauty; the other is based on the belief that true beauty was an honesty in portraiture. This made manifest the inherent

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11 “You have to admit, it is ugly”, a direct quote from a fellow competitor in Designs On Democracy, when looking at our first-prize-winning scheme for Letchworth Town Hall, 2003.
12 In another competition, a friendly judge lets us know why we did not win, describing the architecture of our scheme, as “a bit severe”. Incidentally we knew we could never have won the competition once we saw the winners’ scheme. It was not the sort of architecture we would like to make, as we found it too anodyne and polite, terming it ‘Vanilla Architecture’.
13 Byrne, David. “How Music Works”, 2012. “After auditioning at CBGB, Talking Heads got offered a slot opening for the Ramones. I wouldn’t call what we did entertainment, exactly, but it was riveting in its own disturbing way. Not quite like looking at an accident, as one writer said, but not far from it either.”
Test 2
Project Performance
4 criteria

Test 3
Project Performance
8 Criteria

→ see next spread
qualities – both good and bad – of a whole person, and embodied not only how they looked but how they behaved too. Their visage was judged alongside their actions.

**Can you make your own mind up?**
People appear reluctant to make their own minds up about what they like, especially when it comes to architecture. They are often baffled, and revert to following what they already know or have been told to believe, via the opinions of pundits and trusted advisors. Because people can be slow to change, it inevitably takes a long time for cultural shifts to occur, to develop evolving aesthetic preferences in a variety of audiences. Like many cultural artefacts, what is considered weird and unpalatable one week, becomes sought after as a desirable ‘must have’ item shortly afterwards. And so it is with architecture that dislike becomes like.

**Confronting Taste**
We appreciate that not everyone views our work in the same way, and for some it is not easily understood. What we discovered through the matrix test was that some of our most popular projects never received a major award in England but received much acclaim internationally. For example, St Anne’s Sure Start which didn’t receive a UK architecture award though it was often shortlisted, was included on the long-list for the Mies van der Rohe European Prize for Contemporary Architecture. This is an accolade of national significance as few projects achieve this honour, which is awarded every two years. In 2005, when nominated, we did not understand this contrasting view between local and international audiences. We felt it was a good project but the UK judges did not seem to understand it. Later we realised that perhaps it was slightly too ‘new’ and pushed too many boundaries simultaneously. As a result, people thought it was somewhat awkward and they didn’t know what to think of it. Through the PhD research I have discovered this element in our work, identified as "The Search for New Beauty".

**Becoming Tasteful**
People have told us previously that they assumed a project has won awards as it received so much positive press coverage. As a teacher and examiner I have often seen student portfolios in which our work is referenced. I have even seen built examples of work by other architects that echo some of the specific qualities of our earlier work. It is as if the original has spoken to other architects and consequently influenced their work.

**Our Design Values**
How does this transference of ideas really happen? How can something in the form of architecture, which demands engagement and participation as well as abstract observation, be appreciated without alienating its audience? How can it speak of our values? How can it take participants on a journey that shares our underlying ambitions across a wider territory, without resorting to being overly simplistic or being seen as a built manifesto? How can we create a sense of duration in our work, which prolongs the experience of how our work can communicate on many levels all at once? Is it possible for audiences to take three steps forward and then look back at our work – and in doing so, see our Design Values?
In 2006 I wrote an unsolicited letter, having decided that I must at least try to build my own house.

The letter began: “Dear Lady Denham, I would like to buy your house.” I explained to her honestly that I had scoured Ordnance Survey maps to find a site on which to build a home and that her large garden offered a potential opportunity. After carefully explaining how the development appraisal had generated the value of the site, she answered, “Yes, I would love to sell you my house.”

Effectively, I bought the garden and sold on the original house. This was a tactic another architect\(^1\) had explained to me when I was training and I had always remembered her precious advice. She had said, “The only way to be truly independent is to realise the value of what you bring to any project; without you, the chances of maximising real value is lessened. You hold the key.”

In the course of the transaction, Lady Denham gave me a copy of a letter that she had found under the eaves in the attic when she had acquired the house in the 1960s. The person who eventually built her house, which is hidden behind a row of terraced houses, had written the letter in 1871. He had also asked to buy a garden because he, too, wanted to build a new house in the large garden of an existing house.

My actions place me in a speculative tradition that has existed on this site,\(^2\) just two miles from Parliament Square, for more than 140 years.

By analysing this project I have discovered that I am also part of a grander tradition, that of the architect as agent. By this I mean that the way one decides to behave as an architect – how you bring agency into your endeavours – is as important in architecture as the qualities in the work that you make.

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1 Joanna van Heyningen.
2 The original house, The Avenue, was built between 1871–81, a grand name for a humble backlands development. By 1950 the status of the house had been aggrandised and it was known as The Farmhouse. It had acquired a presumed heritage of being the oldest house in the area – making it appear more embedded in history than it really was.
Reclaiming The Covert House
→ see next spread
The Crocet House
Reclaiming The Covert House
Early banner drawing setting out the design values and design actions that create a project from inception, including city, landscape, material, environmental and awkward qualities.
The Covert House is worth considering in close detail because at one time it appeared to contradict so many of the overall findings of this thesis. Not only does the project offer the chance to consider whether it is really a better work of architecture than first imagined, which it proves to be, thankfully. When the House is laid bare it also acts as a tool to identify specifically what qualities or actions are in evidence that also occur in projects at a broader level (See Chapters 2 and 3), and that informed the House's development.

Through The Covert House we can ask what ideas and actions were used in its evolution, and if they were similar to those used elsewhere in our work. We can ask why these ideas were pursued and consequent actions undertaken, and what the underlying reasons for them were.
to use as few materials as possible. Whether public or private, we want our projects to raise the bar in terms of design quality.

The design of this small two-storey house, built partially underground on its backlands plot due to planning restrictions, can be described by a few simple rules. First, use only two materials. Second, when a decision has to be made, ask: "Is it Concrete or White?" where the latter was an abstracted notion of an almost non-material quality. The former was as close as one gets to building with earth—their creating shelter that was essential, primordial, bespoke, handmade yet challenged notorious preconceptions. Our design challenge was: How can you make a comfortable and welcoming home from concrete? We sought to create a beautiful Brutalist Cottage, economically uniting the best of the city and garden, on reclaimed land.

Externally, the house is a box-like form of two colliding cubes. It appears white, scaleless (by virtue of being devoid of any detail that might reference a sense of relative size) and entirely concrete on the inside, with a plain white floor throughout to reflect light upwards onto the poured concrete soffits. Paying homage to nature and the organic, we lined areas for washing, water and human contact with simple marble linings, carefully juxtaposed with a few bespoke timber caskets. These luxurious counterpoints to the raw finishes elsewhere would register occupation over time.

The concrete was cast with deep angled reveals to the windows, each purposefully abstract, creating a series of carefully framed vistas out of the lower rooms. To maximise light and to manifest the thickness of the wall construction these chamfered planes appear as if carved out by the light falling on surfaces. Cast light on the concrete revealed its sculptural form and highlighted the sensual quality of the material, narrating how it had once been fluid before solidifying. Each face differed, registering the varying weather conditions of the day it was poured.

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4 We wanted to use tamped earth construction, working with the assistance of Martin Rauch but unfortunately the wall thicknesses were prohibitively large for this tight urban site.
Early sketches

Letter, 2006

Letter, 1871
Case Study I

External lightwells at the lower level would also drop sunlight into internal spaces, allowing precise views of the sky and trees at all times, maintaining a dialogue with the landscape.

Internally there would be no corridors, only a series of interconnecting spaces to create a sense of layering between inside and out and a feeling of openness in a house blessed with natural light on all four sides. The white exterior would also have chamfered planes to the opening of the large windows, in dialogue with the interior treatment of the floor below. In this case, each window would be set on the inner face of the construction, rather than the external face, to maximise views out to the garden. Each opening would be framed with a mirrored finish, purposefully confusing the perception of boundaries between inside and out, reflecting the abundant greenery on all sides, and allowing the building to look as if it might disappear.

A manifesto

An architect’s own house is a built manifesto, whether consciously authored or not. As we designed, we were confident that it could be a strong design but there was no time to talk about beauty, concentrating more on securing planning permission, which consumed our efforts for several years.

Re-reading

The re-reading of The Covert House came about by rescoring this critical project after the shock of having initially assessed its qualities as the lowest scoring of all 21 key projects by DSDHA. Why did it score so low?

Upon reinterrogation, with the same criteria but with the benefit of more considered reflection, the results were very different.

In this second assessment, previously low-scoring qualities such as Materiality, ‘Clarity’, ‘Awkward’ or ‘City’ that were on the graph and under-performing, now gained buoyancy across the board and joined the high scores of Landscape/Hybrid and Sustainability. This demonstrated that while the project had not changed at all, the way in which it was considered had altered.

It was a refreshing double-take, raising the status of the project considerably. But why was something previously considered so bad now considered much better?

Even though only six months had passed since the first assessment, it is clear that reflection on the way we work – discovered through the PhD – had yielded a new perspective on the qualities of the project.

By re-engaging with the detailed design of the Covert House through the doctoral criteria, the House effectively ‘came out of hiding’. It became part of DSDHA’s body of work alongside other projects in the studio, rather than remaining private. The House could be embedded into the demanding daily life of the practice.

This seems to support the notion that for any of our projects to pass muster and to be considered authored by DSDHA, they must be subject to the same level of testing and interrogation. In this way, their qualities can be revealed and then acted upon in a conscious manner – like a trajectory passing between different orbits of influence. Only once this occurs can we “own” it.

5 We were confident we could deliver a great design based on the policies in place at the time. However, we faced hostility from a few objectors who were residents of the well-heeled roads on either side of the site. Their lobbying efforts disrupted the planning process and cost the Local Authority a great deal of money. These neighbours (who paid for their own planning consultant) pursued their objections even though planning officers, the local amenity group and the local authority design champion supported the scheme along with other more enlightened neighbours. Ultimately, as we had expected, we went to appeal to secure permission and received a positive assessment from the inspector.

6 See Appendix for all PRS Sheets including “Performance of Projects Over Time” and “Project Performance”.

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The Covert House: Acting on an Idea and Searching for New Beauty

Wilderness garden

Plan
Case Study I

In this case, the qualities common to all of our work lay within the work, but their potential was not being maximised as the project was considered 'outside' the studio. A key discovery has been that by making it known through manifesting qualities consciously and debating the design ideas, the way we understand the work improves and with it, the design quality.

Clarity
We began by making a huge 1:20 model of the house to test its qualities of both overall and detailed 'clarity' of ideas to see if the design was achieving our aims.

City/Garden
Seeking a delicate balance between the project as both foreground and background, we were aware of the tradition of the house as a classical garden pavilion. We also realised the contemporary urban necessity to build more homes in cities and use leftover garden spaces as a suitable sites within strict policy. Simultaneously the house would frame everyday life and sit quietly as a backdrop in the garden.

Awkward/Materiality/Environment
The house would possess details where a bespoke kind of beauty and awkwardness would manifest awareness of the contemporary dialogue between craft, materiality and sustainability. This sat alongside its required apparatus to provide ventilation, ASHP, solar panels etc. (concealed where possible); and all within budget.
Tests were carried out and the design was pinned up for review. Most important of all, we started talking about it.
The interrogation seem to suggest that 'the manner in which we do things' is to create an architecture that is 'beyond design'. Our architecture is self-evident and of the present. In dealing with the contradictions of contemporary society our work has to manifest simultaneously: to be active and participatory; to be sensory and social; to sit between the concrete and the ephemeral. Hence architecture has to, and in this case does, manifest a 'dynamic instability' of which others have written about our work.

Design passagiata
We use our studio as a place of exchange. We regularly walk our clients and collaborators through the studio to discuss our work and how we go about it. This is a kind of design passagiata.
This act is important because without this passage through our studio filled with people, ideas and activity, Mark Irving would never have seen the Covert House model and made a key remark that helped with the evolution of our design methodology rhetoric.
Mark is a former client, friend and most recently, a collaborator. When he saw the model in the summer of 2011, he remarked that it reminded him very much of work by Eduardo Chillida. This is not the first time Mark has linked our work with that of artists but this time something fell into place.

7 There are references within the design to many other garden pavilion houses including Jefferson’s Monticello, Henry Hoare’s Temple of Flora at Stourhead, Bess of Hardwick’s Hardwick House, Eileen Gray’s house E1017, The Smithsons’ Solar Pavilion, Mies van der Rohe’s Farnsworth House, Burlington’s Chiswick House, as well as several Japanese houses where the relationship with nature is enhanced.
8 It is of course part of an established contemporary architectural tradition too; from Richard and Su Rogers’ house for his mother in 1968, to MJ Long and Sandy Wilson’s 1970’s home, or van Heyningen and Haward’s Laurier Road house in 1986.
10 Mark Irving is a story designer and curator.
11 Irving likened the grotto-like formation at Potters’ Fields Park Pavilions to the work of Thomas Demand; the fascinating allure he saw of the charred timber evoking “darkness visible” was like Milton’s description of the tantalising quality of blackness.
Eduardo Chillida, Tapies Lo profundo, 2001
When I see Chillida’s world it is as if it were made by a kindred spirit. It is carved, precise, intensive and both small and large at once, monumental and heavy but full of impossible 'alabaster light'. His work speaks to ours.

The covert correspondence between ourselves and other creative disciplines that was identified is just that: an act of communication, where we share the need to make statements on the relationship between people and the natural world, culture and society.

It is something we feel we want to do, but we chose not to talk about all the time, even though it exists in the background.

**Transition**

How did we manage this transition from private to public project? Where are the revised boundaries?

I now perceive of this project in a way that means I can draw a line between what I do professionally and who I am, privately. Though my professional interests are intimately related I clearly see them separately. The two categories that comprise my behaviours and my ideas, are manifest in what I call my design values and my design actions. These are the two generators of my architecture and they relate to me as a private individual but do not have to cross the line into my personal life, unless I decide that I want them to.

**Negotiation**

In order to make this project happen it required an enormous amount of negotiation. I have always understood the role of the architect to be that of a negotiator. I enjoy the conversation of bringing consensus between people, hearing counter-arguments, looking for solutions and then designing in response to these conversations. It is hard work, but worth it.

The next pages include a picture of my daughter. She stands in the overgrown garden at the moment when we considered buying the site and I was starting to employ the skills of an architect to realise untapped value and kick-start potential ideas. Before undertaking the PhD I would never have shown such a private image.

Here it is included because the image serves another purpose – it acknowledges the way one’s past plays a role in shaping one’s point of view, which is often unrecognised or unacknowledged in architecture. Perhaps the image of my daughter also refers to the fact that my parents made a modern house (by radically re-imagining an old house) on a site like this. Until recently, I didn’t realise how many personal traditions are embedded in a building of any sort. Again, we might know this, but do not necessary make it explicit.

"For some reason"

In this project, an example of this reasoning might be seen when we cut down the numerous existing misshapen trees to make the site. I insisted ‘for some reason’ that we keep the felled timber. In and of itself the wood was of poor quality but for me it was an important stepping-stone on the journey of this extraordinary project and its site.

In a way that I hoped was not sheer sentimentality, I felt that their re-use might represent some of the values we find within our work at a wider level. The trees were sent to my friend, a woodsman at the New Forest, where they are now kept. They have been milled and set to air dry and will be made into built-in timber furniture, of Cherry, Pear and Walnut. We didn’t want to waste them. Nor waste the opportunity for their potency. They symbolise the positive re-use of materials, site, and cities. They also signal that, with careful thought, attention or presence of mind, we can be economic in our means whilst bringing delight and usefulness.

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12 Our first feature in a magazine in *Blueprint* 1999 was entitled "Negotiating Architecture"
Case Study I

Child in the garden

Child watching woodsman in the New Forest

Stair drawing
The Covert House: Acting on an Idea and Searching for New Beauty

Manifesting qualities in the Covert House
Sharing skills
In another image, my son is looking on at this process of reclaiming the trees on a trip to the New Forest, learning about the nature of making. This idea of sharing skills and experiences very much underlies the way that we make architecture, as well as stronger ideas about materiality.

The image of a child and an old man is a consciously chosen reference to the cross-generational duration of making. He is a craftsman and the child looks on and learns, but also is apprehensive. For him, this is new territory. The acknowledgement of craft has been a key revelation from this case study about our way of designing. The very making of things: the resonance and emotional connection between the material of an existing site; the effects of human labour; the embedded creativity of the makers themselves; is a trajectory that could be explored further.

Exchange and encounter
Finally, this project was the first time that I purposefully introduced my worlds of teaching and practice, bringing them together in a social rather than simply an intellectual sense. The underlying hope was to maximise the potential for DSDHA to be a place of exchange and encounter between ideas and people.

I invited my students and my practice to visit The Covert House to learn about construction techniques. On this occasion it was to learn from the man who made the concrete, and also for them to learn from me as I talked about the architectural ideas behind the project. I shared the story of architects’ entrepreneurial inventiveness: how you might get to build a house as an architect because of your special skills. The doctoral Case Study re-evaluation of this house has allowed me to change my practice. I now bring different worlds together in a way that wasn’t previously possible when they were considered to be discrete actions.13

13 The awareness of actions is further explored in Case Study II on The West End Project.
Agency

I began to wonder if being an architect was about acting creatively as a speculator. Not simply as a speculator of space and ideas within a project, but of other wider opportunities; the very opportunities that someone with well-developed spatial intelligence can conjure up. Is a letter to a Baroness evidence of a quality all architects have deep within themselves, which frequently lies dormant, or is utilised only within set pre-defined professional limits? Should this quality be revealed and more purposefully demonstrated to a wider audience as well as to the benefit of architects themselves? Are these speculations an erosion or a direct reinforcement of the very evidence of what architects should be? Is writing a letter really a reflection of agency?

Was architectural agency and positive change exemplified by bringing both sides of DSDHA together in the Covert House? In this instance, I acted as a creative speculator as well as a professional with the social responsibility of enhancing the culture of architecture and contributing to the creation of social identity on a broader scale.
If the work we make at DSDHA is underscored by a series of values, can we begin to understand how these might be reinforced by the actions we chose to take? Building on the original drawings that I had made, which explained our design methodology to new members of DSDHA¹, I set about creating a series of diagrams that attempted to reveal a design’s dynamic voyage through the key stages of development. This included site research, brief interrogation, public engagement, testing ideas, agreeing key themes, absorbing client input; then adding ideas, projections and sketches to the mix. The developments took place, so I thought, mainly through our formal reviews with David Hills, senior members of the studio and the project design team itself, this ran in parallel with the design collaboration within the studio to resolve details as it headed towards completion. In terms of stewardship, David and I play a crucial part in this progress, determining the actions that are required to make things happen.

**Decision time**

An area highlighted on the drawing documenting a project’s journey, "Design Methodology, 2005", identifies the key moment when themes and aims are agreed in order that the architecture will be legible and clear. Through the process of exhaustive experimentation it must then continue along one of the forked paths of possible routes. I asked: What is my role within this process?

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¹ As discussed in Chapter 1. We have always been open to outside advice, seeking help in structuring the studio, understanding the business plan, fee-earning efficiencies (or the lack thereof) and critically respecting and developing relationships within the team and with our clients. The suggestion was made that it would be good if I met every new member of the team to explain our way of working with them, so we could discuss how design evolves in the studio.
Moments of resistance

The drawing, "Collisions_Revealing Moments of Resistance", broke down the design journey, stage by stage. This drawing makes clear that I play a key role in reviewing design options that have been tested. I also reveal points of tension or conflict in order to ask for new avenues to be explored. It is not simply a matter of liking an approach or not, it is a way of trying to provoke architecture that has an inevitability, a voice of its own. How do we know if this is achieved?

It is also clear that, usually, I am the one who closes down the process, calling time on the design to determine if it is ready or not. What determines when this point will be?

Collision technique

It is important to identify that at the points where 'sparks fly' in the drawing, key moments of decision-making occur. The whole process is buffeted by 'outside' influence, coincidence, stress' via a purposeful 'collision technique'. In order to succeed, the process must constantly be 'open to new ideas'. How and why does this happen?

Other attempts2 were made to draw out the evolutionary process, or set of actions that influence the design under my gaze.

Drawing Orbits and Trajectories

The most important drawing is "Orbits and Trajectories: Journey through our Values", which was set out in three layers. It aims to reassess a critical aspect within the creative process that had been unacknowledged in the course of the research. It chronicles the specific 'actions' made by an architect within a project.

The drawing aimed to understand our mode of practice, which is to really use drawing (not for the first time) and ask what is it that we’re doing when we evolve design in our studio?

In essence, the diagram borrows from an analogy of constellations within space. It shows how a project progresses on a journey over time as it passes and is influenced by a series of related spheres, each with their own orbits. The project is both drawn to and pushes away from the pull of these orbs. Each orb represents values that underscore the authorship of any project.

As the project progresses it is subject to a series of actions, shown as arrows, that provide further definition as it weaves between the competing opportunities and constraints of the anchoring values. The nature of these actions illustrates the agency and engagement that we use to inform the character of the project, which is eventually delivered. Without these actions there would only be building, not architecture.

These actions are fundamentally founded on the notion of human betterment as a pre-requisite of any architectural act. For DSDHA, the manner in which we engage with the process – from negotiators and facilitators through to being artful and artistic – is what marks our practice as being particularly engaged.

In the background, present but without calling attention to themselves, are the influences and conditions that inform everything we do as architects. We can enhance or diminish these influences if we choose, as long as we are aware of them.

The diagram helps to explain how, as the project progresses on its long trajectory, the design of a project doesn’t occur solely in the studio. It is not made by a single person, but by a whole group of people who inform and shape it over time. Sometimes we work on a kitchen table. Sometimes we work in the studio. Sometimes we pin the work up on a wall and hold a very formal design review process. Sometimes it is more informal.

Alongside this process of 'orbits', we are aware that our teaching, writing, judging, study, and field trips affect and inform our work.

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2 The first tentative "Orbit Diagram" from April 2012 (see Sheet 23 in Appendix) tried to unlock the particular component factors of the process of design at DSDHA. It seems projects are exposed to the influence of a series of factors that go beyond formal considerations, and this exposure happens again and again, during the intensive period of design. Then the second "Design Evolution_The First Orbit Diagram" (see Sheet 16 in Appendix) begins to layer up activities and influences and charts a trajectory through the orbits. It emanates from them, as a kind of stellar navigation.
Orbits and Trajectories: A journey through our values
→ see next spread
Design actions

1. Improving human conditions
2. Engaging
3. Being there, first-hand
4. Collaborating
5. Being responsible
6. Demonstrating expertise
7. Exploring
8. Questioning preconceptions
9. Creative thinking
10. Designing and sketching
11. Technological experience
12. Reflecting
13. Challenging
14. Seeking delight
15. Economy and means
16. Being local to place
17. Accepting Incompletion

Design influences + conditions
Orbits and Trajectories: A journey through our values

Design values

1. Improving human conditions
2. Engaging
3. Being there, first-hand
4. Collaborating
5. Being responsible
6. Demonstrating expertise
7. Exploring
8. Questioning preconceptions
9. Creative thinking
10. Designing and sketching
11. Technological experience
12. Reflecting
13. Challenging
14. Seeking delight
15. Economy and means
16. Being local to place
17. Accepting Incompletion
Revealing Actions & Agency In The Way We Work

Design Methodology, 2005: Highlighting key decision making moments

Collisions Revealing moments of resistance: Highlighted areas show where ‘sparks fly’.
The trajectory drawing tries to capture a kinetic journey along which a project might be propelled in its evolution from start to finish. In effect, it acknowledges that this journey is never complete because it awaits interpretation and occupation by others. The drawing is an attempt to map or record the architect’s role as the author of sequences and exposures through which the project travels. The architect allows pressure or exposure to other influences or factors to shape the ultimate outcome. It is rather like the application of power, whether by design from an engine or by chance via collision, that can change the course of a trajectory in space.

The influences upon each project are diverse, and the architect plays a key role in calibrating the extent to which they inform or deform the project.

Case Study II – The West End Project
For the second Case Study, another focused orbit diagram was made that documented the first two weeks of a live project. This attempted to understand and focus on how we work together creatively at the start of new project, and to illustrate the actions as well as values that inform our studio ethos. In effect, the diagram set out our field of play. It was a test to see if these grander themes and trajectories truely work in real time; whether the discoveries of this PhD hold true.

Not an orderly business
In my case, an idea of a project does not develop in a linear sequence over time, even though it might be seen to proceed through set stages officially. It is not an orderly business. Instead, with purposeful intent, its progress is subject to the review and scrutiny of many criteria while simultaneously, or repetitively, being forced to coalesce with various sources of inspiration.

These multiple, often contradictory, exposures temper the design idea into a stronger entity or presence. Over time, it is wrought through these authored and controlled interactions into a recognisable, independent expression of architecture. As a consequence, it embodies DSDHA design values.

Time and time again
To illustrate the course of its progress, the
Revealing Actions & Agency In The Way We Work

project will be held up and its design intent interrogated from the very start, time and time again. Our reasoning is questioned to see if it manifests all of the competing demands we place upon it. Does it achieve the levels of performance we recognise in the successful projects we author?

The role I play is manifold and ranges from encouraging everyone to:
— standing back and taking an overview of what the project is,
— asking where it has been and
— being aware of where it might hope to go.

I ask if the project goals we established at the start are being achieved, and if those goals remain relevant.

To generate the design ideas a large number of issues are assessed simultaneously, like multiple plates being spun as illustrated in the image below. These issues need to be managed, brought into order, and steered. It is like organising a swarm.

My role is to help to identify these issues, and to decide what specific aspects need to be furthered in the design, in order to author its development and a clear way forward.

Oblique interventions
In order to carry out the action of design, I intervene in its process of evolution at a number of scales, and in various ways. Along with David, and then with the team, the very first sketches are read in parallel with specific site research. An amalgam of actions begins to generate orbits around a particular issue. There may be several orbits revolving around one issue, and several issues may overlap or affect each other. Within this constellation of issues there are many gravitational forces that then inform our consequent assessment of where to travel to next. It is an exercise in simultaneity.

In trying to draw these relationships, I made a remark that signalled the unresolved component of how we design. In the margins I wrote: "Oblique interventions ... this is the hardest [thing] to define." Little did I know at the time that this modest statement would be a key PhD discovery.

The very nature of these 'oblique interactions' that come about when orbits coexist led me to question where my particular act of authoring within a collaborative process becomes manifest.³

Positive tension
When deciding the trajectory of a project, I sometimes need to exert what might be considered an extraordinary pressure on the project. It is a kind of bloody-mindedness that forces through and removes a point of resistance. Conversely, this pressure may generate a purposeful sense of tension in a project that has become weak. To dislodge the stasis of a failing situation, I often try to look obliquely, or to push ideas in an eccentric fashion, fostering a new point of view.

These actions are never capricious; they hopefully propel the momentum of the project in the right direction.

I now understand that the progress of any design project – whether an event, a building or a city-plan – is similar. All projects evolve and all are subject to impetus, interventions and influences that impact on its life within the studio. Consequently, this occurs when the projects are then released to the wider world, where others respond to or adapt them as necessary.

I have chosen to call these impulses 'Design Actions'; they are read in tandem with our 'Design Values'.

³ Coincidently, it was not until after the penultimate presentation in April 2013 that I stumbled across a way of working espoused by Brian Eno's "Oblique Strategies". This method was discovered in the same vein, via my first forays into Twitter, which allows chance encounter on a hitherto unimagined scale. These strategies exemplify the very methodology DSDHA espouses.
Authorship

Our project teams embody rigour, intelligence and talent, and I work with each of them to help author the part of the process over which they have responsibility. My role operates on a strategic, overarching scale, motivating and steering the narrative of a project’s development.

I maintain an overview of the entire output of the studio to maintain consistent awareness and responsiveness to the values that underscore DSDHA. Some projects I direct more specifically and for these, I use our methodology hands-on, right down to the smallest detail. In all projects, I review and interrogate the intention to check that the project aims are present in design execution at all scales. I assist the teams to loop backwards and forwards thematically to refine the definition and new beauty of our architecture-in-waiting.

The nature of this authoring is important to making a critical and self-aware architecture that is relevant to the human condition of the future and today. Authoring is a both a precise and random process where a project might be said to be ‘placed in the path of luck’. It is not forced along a predetermined route; it arrives at a point where it seems to lead itself to an autonomous sense of being. At this point, projects seem to have their own internally derived and specific logic that no longer depends on the architect as author. It is sufficiently tempered, tested and interrogated by our own choreographed projections to pass muster as DSDHA. Most importantly, it can take on a life of its own.

Looking outside the studio

By closely examining behaviours written on the diagram as influencing factors I am surprised to see that not all of this influential activity takes place in the studio.

I was interested to consider what role these outside impulses had within the studio.

Origins and Agency

Perhaps creating architecture is an “orbit of action” that is simultaneously a professional undertaking as well as one that contributes to contemporary culture. Does this equate to an architect being both a speculator of the space within a project, and of its many (often overlooked) related opportunities? Are these opportunities something that only spatial intelligence can conjure? Is being able to create an “orbit of action” a quality held by all architects? If so, should this quality be revealed and more purposefully demonstrated to a wider audience so that it is not confined to personal practice? Do these speculations erode exactly what it is that architects should be good at?

Do these speculations lead to identifying a notion of the architect as an agent of positive change? Or is it enough that the process here is only about passing on the sound advice given by a mentor?

When mapping the origins of design, it is clear that one’s upbringing and evolution of spatial intelligence plays an important role in the way one designs. Here, it is not a primary focus for me, but in some way it assists understanding my preoccupations. Growing up in the company of craftsmen and regularly visiting building sites may have informed my own interest in making, being hands-on, and may shape the confidence DSDHA has in craftsmanship. We believe it is an achievable and highly desirable quality in architecture.

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4 David Porter has referred to the key phenomenon of humans being able to pick berries while looking out for a bear – an innate skill to operate across scales spatially for survival.

5 While refining the actions and values of our work, another drawn attempt “Design Process as a Map” (see Sheet 14 in Appendix) was made. It represents the process of drawing together the several studies that inform and shape the outcome of DSDHA’s design process. This resulted in an almost geographic map that was helpful in setting out themes and issues. However, because of it from as an “inevitable confidence”, [unclear] it is like each tributary of a river that leads to a single meeting point at the sea. Therefore, it did not capture adequately the four-dimensional, dynamic and unstable quality that the process actually entails as it bounces between and is influenced by several factors over the course of time.
Two graphs: Roles adopted outside of the studio, and the studio size over time
Likewise, it might lead to our work being firmly grounded in ‘real life,’ in material conditions as opposed to more theoretically led themes.

A backdrop to a voyage
My itinerant childhood was suffused with influences from horticulture and the landscape. Growing up in a modern house with a designed garden influenced me. My spatial intelligence matured very early on as I was able to shape my own first spaces by draping wallpaper from branches under trees, occupying tree houses, sheds or dens. I also was able to literally lay bricks with my grandfather. Being exposed to different environments in Australia and Kenya would have shaped an awareness of the environment as a crucial component in the design and occupation of architecture, and the ground on which it sits.

Participation
My desire for architecture to answer back, to communicate to a wider audience, perhaps comes from wanting it to be part of a more egalitarian, non-elitist culture, in which everyone can participate fairly. I wanted to avoid pretension and distance and to make architecture that consciously informs its own situation. This desire recognises that an important role of an architect is to inform the world of architecture. Being a professional architect is a subset of the overwhelming realm of architectural culture to which so many others contribute and inform. These forces ultimately influence our overall built and virtual environment on a scale that often goes unrecognized. That is why I now realise I have been engaged in other distractions. For example, in 1997 I established the Jane Drew Prize for Architecture, to foster and understand collaboration, and the role of women in architecture. This is continued through my teaching, writing, work on television and my active contribution to the debate and exchange of ideas. I am currently extending this through my PhD and a forthcoming book about ‘What it takes to be an architect’. These forums discuss new modes of practice that I believe are now needed to make great architecture.

Only through this PhD have I realised the degree to which I am occasionally a provocateur, demanding change for the better; or an agitator purposefully galvanising debate. I am overcome with the need to act upon something, not simply stand by. I decided to see if I could draw this evolution of my role as an agent beyond the studio.

Agency evident in the Case Study projects
The research focuses on the manner in which agency can be defined as intervening in practice. It questions how I place myself within the development of ideas and actions that shape a project’s birth, as well as my contributions to wider issues concerning the culture of architecture.

The first Case Study is strongly autobiographical. It focuses on one small project, singled out from the multitude we have engaged in. As with the PhD, it has been ‘under construction’ for a considerable amount of time. The Covert House was a building project that encompasses the formal and social themes underscoring our practice’s work. It has acted as a tool to reveal the ways in which we work, the tools we use, and my

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6 RIBAJ 120 Debate transcript, London June 2013: “I think there is a really fundamental lesson to be learnt now, that when you study architecture you are not just studying the making of an object, or an isolated cultural artefact. You are in fact engaged this event called architecture. You are studying to be an architect and so through your education it’s really important that you are exposed to and absorb the energy and excitement of making architecture; being an architect; using advocacy; agency; really being aware of the actions you take as an architect and not just the product. It is a fundamental shift in attitude.”

7 In particular I appeared in two series of a popular television programme with Kevin McCloud, “to deliver inspirational advice on creating dream homes” (quote from the Channel 4 website) with the personal aim of encouraging good design and debunking the myths of construction. In addition I have been a “talking head” for broadcasts on the culture of architecture, The Stirling Prize, etc.
Counterpoint

Crescendo
role within it. It shows a series of attempts to draw out the qualities of the project over time. The research focuses on the manner in which my role can be defined as ‘intervening’ in practice: how I place myself within the development of ideas and actions that shape a project’s coming into being, as well as contributing to wider issues about the culture of architecture.

The second Case Study, The West End Project, is fundamentally concerned with our modes of practice. It is a grand urban framework plan and is the largest scale we have been commissioned to work on to date. It is a project that has pushed our practice in a direction we could have previously only dreamed of. It is true city-making on a vast scale and it carries enormous responsibilities and pressures as well as rewards. The West End Project proves an explanation of the notion of agency and ‘field of play’ in relation to the scale of the project itself. Both notions make evident the role of orbits and trajectories in our work.

Conducting one’s own business
At this point, I also questioned how I conduct my part of the business. Our projects have grown in size over time, but we still make small projects. What was the reason for this?

Another diagram I drew asked whether success had to be understood as inevitable growth (a crescendo) – an image promulgated as a necessity with most UK practices. Was there another way of doing things to form a practice of contrasts and variety, that remained in touch with detail (a counterpoint)?

I had also drawn a diagram about whether our project types could be defined by geographic location (edge of the city or in the centre?) or type (architectural or urban design?). They are now all seen as one type of endeavour based on our design values.

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10 “Roles and Studio Size Over Time” (See Appendix for all PRS Sheets)
Revealing Actions & Agency In The Way We Work

Community of Practice

To better reflect on our relationship with peers and mentors, I conducted an informal survey within DSDHA and then re-drew the diagram "August 2013: Version 2 Community of Practice". This new drawing questioned who we felt connected to in practice; other like-minded architects. I found my expectations and those of others had shifted over time to include a broader sense of community. The results linked us to younger and older practices in the UK and globally. It was a diverse, illuminating mix. Having opened up the process to others within DSDHA alongside this period of reflecting on the PhD, I found connections with new groups that were not heterogenous, and which spanned not only continents, but also decades.

The links to partnerships included Lacaton + Vassal (who have an aesthetic that seems to derive from a parallel focus on non-formal, social and economic concerns); Robbrecht + Daem (with whom I taught at the AA and who refuse to rush towards design until all conditions have been absorbed); Diller + Scofidio (who constantly experiment on the margins of architecture as well as the mainstream); and even, as Glancey expected, The Smithsons (now with an obvious resonance between the social and formal awareness of the need to derive new architectural forms to suit contemporary social situations). The connections also included Venturi + Scott Brown, and Jane Drew + Maxwell Fry, who were both key mentors of mine. Both women were in partnerships where...
Chapter 3

Before PhD: isolated groups?

After PhD: interconnected communities of practice
they set radical agendas for new generations of architects, but their significant roles are often played down. A surprise discovery during the PhD was a photograph taken before I was born of my father’s parents in front of a building site. It provided a new connection for here was my grandmother in workman’s overalls who had also built the house I had only heard attributed to my grandfather. Suddenly her world was part of mine. She is my new mentor of partnership, making buildings, shaping lives, and who’s hidden story needed to be revealed.

Making space to create
In 2003 we consciously decided to introduce a more formalised ‘design review’ process. A series of models was made, parameters established, and a conscious rigour applied to the process based on our newfound methodology. This was a seminal moment of reflection within our studio. As it evolved it changed the course of DSDHA.

This change had arisen from necessity. DSDHA’s first studio space at Iliffe Yard housed about eight people and the review process could take place at the large table around which we sat. When the studio grew and projects became more complex, we were forced to use two rooms, and had to adapt.11

Since establishing DSDHA we have actively resisting the notion of ‘unsullied’ pure authorship. We have searched for structures and theories, preferring the layered meaning acquired by a design process that is based on collaboration and practice-based research. We recall Jane Drew’s dictum that, “Architecture is ten–people thick”.12

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11 This raises another train of thought. How would we have changed if the studio was in located in another larger single space, or, if we had not grown so much? Would we have still evolved a similar design methodology?
Chapter 3

View of Iliffe Yard

View of the new studio
Where we find ourselves on purpose

As a designer, one’s chosen location is a key action. I have learnt that DSDHA are in South London for a reason. I used to think we were there by accident. However, it is by design, because we want to be situated on the margins, not in the centre of the city. We want to be surrounded by ordinary people as well as other like-minded makers. We chose our studio in Iliffe Yard because it is surrounded by artists and craftspeople. It is now clear that this is, of course, a decision taken on purpose. The map above was included in an edition of Icon magazine dedicated to creativity in London. The index page of all key designers and architects interviewed, shows only four who are located south of the river as opposed to the dense clusters to the north.

We are part of a community that also create in the south of the city; other artists, makers, designers and thinkers surround us. Where we are located in the future will reflect our values at that time. Hopefully, though, the choice will be a designed outcome.

11 This raises another train of thought. How would we have changed if the studio was in located in another larger single space, or, if we had not grown so much? Would we have still evolved a similar design methodology?
12 Bristol Centre for the Advancement of Architecture, "Jane Drew Architect, a tribute from colleagues and friends on her 75th birthday 24th March 1986", 1986.
This case study is a snapshot of the first few weeks of a current project within DSDHA. The project, called The West End Project, arose from a competition invitation for which we prepared our submission in just one week. On winning, we quickly took our first ideas forward. From inception, we began work and presented our first client presentation only a week later.

The project is an urban design and landscape framework for a large stretch of London, bound by Fitzrovia and Bloomsbury, Covent Garden and Euston. It comprises the redesign of Tottenham Court Road, Gower Street and New Oxford Street, the side streets in between them, as well as the area south of the boundary, including Shaftesbury Avenue and St Giles High Street.

Researching this project in detail, helps to critically illustrate my particular role alongside others within the design process. It highlights the trajectories we follow enroute to developing an approach to a project that aligns with our design values and those of our client.

The Field of Play
I created an orbit diagram, called "The manner we do it – the actions of a project."

1 This drawing of great intensity attempts to make manifest the complex inter-relations between various parts of the process, which informs the design as it develops. The first move we make in the project is to reflect, to build our confidence and to reassure ourselves that we are capable of delivering it. This is quickly followed by a visit to the site, which attempts to understand the proposition not just as a self-contained commission but as 'a piece of city.'

The West End Project is the largest extent of London City for which we have been asked to be responsible. Strangely, it seems manageable, as the DSDHA disposition is ‘urban’. Our interest with the city and its people is always to the fore. In each of our projects and in our teaching, we commonly map huge territories or diverse domains and bring to bear a multitude of influences. We make many actions too, and this can be described as our field of play.

1 See Sheet 9 in Appendix for further annotation.
2 This echoes the declaratory tone at our first public lecture at the RIBA in 1999. As a very new practice, with little work to show and only ideas, we stated our aim to work between Infrastructure and Intimacy. This was our portmanteau conveying our hope to inform the built environment as experienced across different scales, not just notionally or strategically.
Operations, Agitations and Actions in The West End Project:
→ see next spread
Operations, Agitations and Actions in The West End Project:
Early study banner drawing used as a narrative device, pulling together the orbits and trajectories that combine to generate the beginning of a new project. These range from where we choose to locate ourselves, to the use of new technologies and the history of the site.
Actions of a project
I began a drawing to describe the simultaneity of our way of designing. It indicates the process over time, and the way in which we overlay and pull together heterogenous material, including conscious and unconscious influences, requirements and ambitions to commence a project’s progress.

The drawing demonstrates our preoccupations. In the end it ultimately reveals a series of ‘design values’ that emerge and are made evident through a set of applied ‘design actions’.

Time is arranged vertically from the top of the page to the bottom along a delicate anchoring stem. On it are notes, sketches and tendrils that explain things which take place, are thought about, or that exert an influence. All are included even if they occupy the background or are tangential to the principle narrative.

Cities should be open
The very first event on the top left side of the diagram states our belief that cities should be open, beautiful and specific to their place in the world. It is a surprisingly simple declaration, made unself consciously, with which to kick off a project. This is the first time our ethos has been so clearly articulated. Every project, whether in our practice or research, is a chance for us to sound the clarion call that every new opportunity can offer: “What real change can we make happen?” This is because we believe in opening the city as an act of defiance and democracy, delight, light, and specificity.

Question preconceptions
In contrast to the declaratory statement on opening, the city is a more humble expression of doubt. It acknowledges that every hope can fade if you do not cast out your own human frailty; you must operate with an acute self-awareness and consciousness. Unless checked and interrogated, motives for actions can be unduly influenced by one’s own history, or proclivities. To that end, we must question first impressions so that preconceptions are acknowledged.

Personal memory/practice memory
Specific memories of a site and its associated emotions need to be interrogated. As a practice we believe we should ‘Never Assume’. We need to be aware of emotional sentiments in relation to factual history, to look for connections, and diversions.

I did not enjoy visiting this area as a child. It was grim. It was unwelcoming and marked the limit of my early urban explorations along Oxford Street. In order to understand the site, I had to throw my past away.
Expertise & Reflection

On the top right corner lies another seemingly disarming and disconnected remark: "Appreciating our growing expertise and that collectively we embody a great deal of knowledge." This enhanced point of view has come from the insights of the PhD research.

In fact, our aims are often so wide-ranging and strategic that in the past their scope and ambition might have made them, upon occasion, to have appeared too extreme or over-confident. It could look as if we were trying to run before we could walk.3

Next to this another comment states, "it is amazing to take time to unfurl a project. Immersive – like diving in".

Perhaps we more readily accept our well-earned wisdom now; perhaps it is a sign of maturity. It is a sense of appreciating, and wanting to share accumulated expertise and knowledge with the studio and its individual members. The desire to nurture talent is a recurrent preoccupation.

A telephone call

On the drawing, I ask where the opportunity to compete in this competition came from. We have no urban design experience in this specific area of the city, nor much at this scale.

Our invitation to participate in the project came through a series of connections. One of them is that someone who lives in South London and knows us peripherally from our urban design work in Vauxhall, also knows of our two small architectural projects in Camden. In those projects, we demonstrated an understanding of the way the city works in a way that, for him, was significant.

The manner in which we have created other projects registers with potential new clients. Maybe they recognise a fresh way of thinking. As noted on the drawing, I remark: "Our efforts do not go unnoticed by past collaborators and colleagues, and by chance an opportunity emerges."

Our work precedes us, thereby reinforcing our belief that for all the solidity of what one might build, it is only one’s reputation that you can carry with you. The evidence of what you have achieved is intangible but is of utmost importance. Our ideas and approach build our credibility, not just the artefacts.

Perhaps it also needs to be stated here that we do not come from other practices or schools where we were specifically ‘taught’ urban design. We have evolved our own methodologies. These depend upon an insistence on personal engagement with place – digging deep to get beneath the surface – to research, enquire and make sense of evidence.

Dodge

Here I am in-situ. In the middle of a very busy northbound one-way road, I am dodging oncoming traffic. I am photographing a new view which will suddenly appear in hopefully two or three years, as a result of traffic changes we aim to make on this major road, to re-orientate its role in the city. As an architect, I put myself forward in the first person, inserting myself into the project and encouraging everyone working on the project to do the same. We try to feel what will be like to be there.

3 Anecdotally, an editor of a major journal thought we had "ideas above our station” at the time when we had run DSDHA for about 4-5 years. This coincided with the completion of our St Anne’s Sure Start project, which was a turning point in our studio’s awareness of authoring design quality. Perhaps the two are linked? We are proud to have ambitions.
The manner we do it
The actions of a project
→ see next spread
The manner we do it

The actions of a project
I make sketches for the project so we have something to show in our submission about our approach and attitude. Through this PhD I now appreciate that these first-hand sketches are extremely important. The act of drawing helps ideas emerge, thoughts to be reframed. They signal the way ahead, so the hand-drawn sketch has come to the fore in the design process. It is important in a way that I didn’t realise before and in a way that I now encourage the studio to engage with as much as possible.

At great speed, given the tight deadline, we exchange ideas, have conversations, and work up to the wire, with late night/early morning overlaps made possible by willpower and remote technology. Our research is both exhaustive and exhausting in our development of an approach.

We get a telephone call. The client says they particularly like the sketches and our collaborative ‘engaged’ approach. We have won the competition.

At the studio we find time to celebrate, we organise an off-the-cuff champagne breakfast for everyone to enjoy a moment of reflection amid our busy schedules. Coincidentally, we’ve also just won another fantastic housing project, so it makes sense to be positive and express our shared gratitude for being in such a fortunate, hard-won and deserving position.
On looking south for the first time
new visual anchors + places

bedford square
silhouette of centerplane
concordance
newspaper space

a new room in the city

tottenham court road as
boulevard

Gower street as promenade

Ask the hidden institutions
to welcome new audiences, and
to invite people in.
No more turning
away from the street.
Dodging Oncoming Traffic: Operations, Agitation & Actions in The West End Project

A map to consider the site’s historic role in London

Early history/ecology map
Mix

I help guide and source possible design directions from our pool of empirical, first-hand research and practice, rather than simple anecdotes or preconceptions.

I try to think ahead and we gather about us a design team4 who we hope will work well with the client. We will ask them to be with us as much as possible, to use our workshop with us, as a place of testing.

Walking with Others

A critical sense of personal momentum is established in parallel to the project’s official sequence of programme milestones.

We spend time with the client walking the streets together, sharing reference points and opinions and increasing the capacity of the project to fulfil our mutual ambitions.

We talk about the local history, ponder why inhabitation was established.5 Rich conversations ensue.

At the same time, these shared walks helps us appreciate the natural fall in the ground. It gently descends as you travel by foot from north to south obscured beneath the layers of city and activity above. We talk together about how a connection with nature must play a role in the plans.

Explaining how we work

As well as listening and talking, we also try to gauge an understanding of the wider constituents of the heterogeneous city, to register their voices.

Because our methodologies are personal to the studio, we let the client know explicitly that this is how we will work on the project. We offer an insight into our particular way of doing things: that we will deploy a sequence of tools particular to this circumstance.

The Role of Research

This manner of thinking predominantly stems from the research processes embedded in our studio:

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We have to draw out before we close in

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Principally this phrase originated through our own education6 and our role as post-graduate teachers.7 We choose a year’s study as a collaborative endeavour, to uncover and investigate a key architectural and urban question, usually on a city scale. Simultaneously, we also insist on understanding the intimacy of the way in which people actually inhabit and occupy the city. Usually this investigation is underpinned with an ambition to anticipate future social and technological shifts that will shape city landscapes. Over time, the city will necessarily have to evolve to accommodate or even purposefully resist change.

4 Team members include Vogt, SKM, Spiers and Major, Mark Irving.
5 The Client gives pointers to their knowledge and interests, talking about the history of St Giles, Covent Garden and Aldwych. They reveal how it was established in the wake of the flight from the City of London by its occupants, which was consequently empty for 300 years.
6 See Archive for Deborah Saunt and David Hills’ Histories, and our educational background.
7 See Archive for Deborah Saunt and David Hills’ Histories and our teaching background.
100 Journeys: DSDHA’s informal engagement with users of the area
Case Study II

Geo-tag map of Flickr images taken in London

Contemporary London
**Big Infrastructure/Small Infrastructure**

Whenever we start a project, we always start with people. Some designers and planners seem to regard people as flotsam and jetsam that floats on the preordained deep, fixed structure of the city. They forget that there would be no infrastructure at all were it not for the will of the people who chose to gather there in the first place!

While we seriously enjoy poring over road junctions, mastering traffic predictions and real-time vehicle flow charts, we always keep people and place to the fore amid the bigger infrastructural issues. We do not want to miss an opportunity to provide value at all scales, while respecting the needs of efficiency and operations. Must buses be parked where they obliterate a view of an historic street; could they be parked in a side alley instead? Because we walked and cycled along all of the roads in the study area, we could ask how it may be more rewarding to travel in the area by bicycle or foot on the side streets instead of just sticking to main roads.

**100 journeys**

Design is personal. Cities happen only where paths cross. We always talk to people, and if the project is of a scale where we can afford it, we try to speak with at least 100 people as a preliminary study. This sample size is a device that does not pretend to be impartial or scientific, but allows us insight through subjective sampling. It ‘takes the air’ of a place – and in some cases acts as an unexpected impulse on the design, accelerating the design process. We ask about people’s journeys in the area to understand why they are there – where they are coming from and going to. Together, their journeys appear as a register of place.

**Technology**

We always try to understand how new technologies can inform our design process to a certain degree. Potential tools emerge from unlikely sources and we use these in balance with more traditional methods. The technological can reveal much about social conditions.

A key consideration is how ‘new ways of doing things’ in one area might inform another apparently unrelated area of enquiry. This helps us reveal aspects of the social/political and economic as well as the technological landscape in which the city is situated.

Here, for example, we used geo-tagged maps, which were created by photographs uploaded to flicker that record where images are taken in London. This sampling can be used to register where people record what they consider to be significant or of interest. These beautiful maps are some of the most evocative images of London. The map is produced automatically without an official cartographer or survey, other than personal actions that record the clustering and dispersal of what registers as being of urban significance. The data helps us to question our assumptions.

**How we read maps**

Here, the River Thames is described only by the places where crowds gather along its banks – tourists recording the landmarks of London. Meanwhile, Oxford Street reveals itself with surprising legibility and splendour. The map data reflects its status as Britain’s favourite shopping street. The West End is the number one place people visit in London, from within the UK, and overseas. It is always in the process of reinventing itself to reflect its social importance. Our West End Project will be a key part of reassembling the Central London jigsaw.

Our preconceptions also tend to suggest that this part of the city does not have the landmarks or the manifest heritage and culture-led identity associated with a tourist destination. The West End is usually perceived as being about retail.
This map clearly tells another story. To the south of our study area and completely isolated is a glowing beacon. It is the British Museum. No visible routes or legible streets lead to its front door, yet it is the brightest spot on the map – not only in the immediate field but within the whole of the city as mapped.

This epicentre of collecting and exhibiting; is visited by thousands every year, but it sits independent and disconnected in an ‘unloved’ city fabric that is clearly of little interest to those visiting. Very few photographs appear to be taken on the way to the Museum.

This map helps to reveal the core brief of the project, which up until this point has remained unarticulated at a true city scale. The project must knit together this part of the city with the rest, preventing it from feeling so dispossessed. It must be rebalanced as a place for people and cyclists, not just cars, lorries and buses. When this is achieved, people may be able to stand back and admire the context, reconnecting themselves with their place in the city.

The significance of the West End as a national asset is crucial. Without it, London would fail to maintain its status as a World City.

24-hour thinking – connecting the social and the seasonal
We also try to bring ‘24-hour thinking’ to the process. We read time at different paces, so that the full effect of a place is registered.

This is read in tandem with connections to the nature and the cycle of the year: where shadows fall during the day; how they change through the year. We can identify opportunities, such as areas west of Tottenham Court Road, which have a perfect prospect for cafes set out in the afternoon and evening sun once the traffic is reigned in.

Must all streets be lit to the same degree at night, particularly when current levels are based on fast-moving traffic designed to a 1960s standard? The lights obliterate cadences of scale and detail that differentiate the city’s hierarchies and nuances. The bright lights of the West End might shine brighter if there were quieter side streets to enjoy as well. Can darkness be a luxury in a city, rather than a factor associated solely with fear, but instead like a park promenade at twilight?

We are always pulling back, trying to read larger connections and relationships. We try to avoid becoming overly fixated at a certain scale and overlooking potential interconnections. Ultimately, rebalanced spaces can have the maximum benefit for the largest number of people.

People mapping
We also map less immediately tangible qualities such as where people seem to be lost; where they might be happy; where conversation takes place; where people are only ever alone or, conversely, mostly in groups. The list is extensive.

Read in combination, this mapping of qualities creates a formidable database with which to prime us as designers. It can help identify key issues to be addressed that are not otherwise apparent. The database is read alongside other research, such as social demographics, environmental mapping and the a thorough and intimate knowledge of the site’s history, both social and physical.

Real-Time Research
For us, researching means to delve deep, to claim historic fact, to avoid trite references and in turn nurture new narratives in the city that are grounded, but unsentimental. We try to be alert to chance encounters.

At the same time, we are introspective and review past projects, which cover large swathes of the city, to see if there are echoes that could inform our response.

City paradigms, links with history and a depth of knowledge
A small drawing beside this remark on the city maps out Central London as a series of neighbourhoods. This helps to highlight the way the project’s study area can be read as a ‘hole in the city’. It is a lacuna into which any hope of meaning or coherence tends to disappear, it is a muddled tangle of congestion where orientation is always compromised. This immediately triggers a
Night-time economy
link to modernist urban visions by the likes of Lesley Martin and Patrick Hodgkinson. They envisaged Bloomsbury as a series of discrete, monocultural campuses. This helps us to see why the original 19th-century proto-modern planning of Bloomsbury is so different from the urban experience of 18th-century Fitzrovia, just on the other side of Tottenham Court Road.

On Amenity
In turn, these urban findings are connected to the amenity and landscape of cities where segregation and systems reflect different cultural concerns and preoccupations. For example, in Olmstead’s model for Central Park, New York, we see one of the first instances of segregated circulation systems on a strategic scale. Vehicles are separated from pedestrians by changes in level. This contrasts with the accretive, ad-hoc evolution of the Royal Parks and London Squares in a dense urban fabric.

Orbits of information
In parallel, we dig into the historical etymology of street names. One street we researched is now called Grape Street. Its history revealed unexpected narratives. Apparently, streets named Grape Street are often derived from the cruder title of Grope Street, which was associated with prostitution and sexual activity. We discover this on Wikipedia, and by chance a discovery is made that links unexpectedly to one of our own projects in Castleford.

We had discovered an original name on the site that held associations as a lovers’ lane. Our Castleford project was on a reclaimed, leftover piece of land beside a dingy underpass at the entrance to the town. We replaced it with a dignified new public space where people could meet as their paths crossed. The project came about through negotiations that we initiated, land-swaps we drew up, and from talking to people about how the underpass had long been known as a place of sexual assignations.

We learned that the existing name "Tittle Cott Bridge" was a Victorian sanitisation of its original title. At the time, we had spread the story of its real name – Tickle Cock Bridge. Once we presenting its history to the people, they were emboldened to take up the charge and have it returned to its more explicit meaning. It was mentioned on Wikipedia for this reason.

Consequently, the project appeared in professional journals and happily reached the news pages of the tabloids, which lapped up the innuendo of the newly restored name of the project and introduced our architecture to a rewarding new audience.

An oblique perspective
Around this time, I am in a debate alongside Tony Travers speaking against the notion that London has become too large and too important nationally. An angle I pursue is grounded in the experience of working on The West End Project. It is based on a conversation with a colleague in the early weeks of the project. I had asked for her opinion about what Tottenham Court Road means to them; using an oblique reference point generates creativity in my thinking.

She talked about shopping and about her West End experience, which was defined by which stores are considered important and that she, like so many, will make specific journeys to shop at. She will now get out at the eastern end of Oxford Street at Tottenham Court Road Station instead of Oxford Circus, to visit the new Primark store there. If she is on Oxford Street already she will make a pedestrian journey further east to visit the same store. She will reshape her mental map of the city by the virtue of the social consequences of a new shop.

9 For us research is critical. See my forthcoming essay “Conversations” in Phaidon’s monograph on Edmund de Waal, March 2014.

Dodging Oncoming Traffic: Operations, Agitation & Actions in The West End Project

Gropesunt Lane

Gropesunt Lane (grope or grope... unt lane) was a street name found in English towns and cities during the Middle Ages, believed to be a reference to the prostitution centred on those areas; it was normal practice for a medieval street name to reflect the street’s function or the economic activity taking place within it. Gropesunt, the oldest known use of which is in about 1239, appears to have been derived as a compound of the words “grape” and “unt”. Streets with that name were often in the busiest parts of medieval towns and cities, and one name appears to have been an important thoroughfare.

Although the name was once common throughout England, changes in attitude resulted in its replacement by more innocuous versions such as Grape Lane. Gropesunt was last recorded as a street name in 1561.

See also

References

Notes

1. In passus 5 of Piers Plowman the writer mentions a “Cranoe of Cokeslane and the Clerk of the chirche”.

Footnotes


Wikipedia search finding Grape Street, including DSDHA reference (bottom)
A historic map of 19th century London
This illustrates what I have now termed 'The Primark Effect' whereby new visitors extend their experience of usual known boundaries in order to visit a new attraction. In doing so, they change the shape of their understanding of the West End of London itself. In turn, values shift, neighbourhoods change and thus the edict 'the city is where the people choose to go' is proven true. Much as we’d like to think that governance or design alone shapes or changes the form of cities, in practice it as much to do with people’s opinions of it.

The city is where the people chose to go

Surprisingly, a lot of architects and urban designers do not put their ear to the ground to listen for the approach of new technology, phenomena or trends. Nor do they relate their findings back to practice by asking, "How will this affect the city?"

We do. Perhaps it is a trademark of our studio; the ability to look and listen, to distil, and then to act.

I talk of this act: of observing and trying to access genuine social and technological urban behaviours when I interview Richard Rogers and Richard Sennett a few weeks later at Urban Age’s Electric City conference. I refer to Tottenham Court Road as 'live research'.

New things to say

As well as coining new phrases, we are often asked for our opinion, and have to "say it as it is", even if it is not what people might want to hear at the time. I give lectures in parallel to practicing, such as at the Royal Academy in 2011 where I say "I think there’s not enough time for beauty in the world at the moment. We really need to look for new beauty but so few take the time to look for it when they are focused so much on only saving money" and I coin the phrase, "the Tesco-ification of architecture." This explains my view of the dumbing down of architecture to be just a product from a huge supplier without engagement or a sense of the local. It makes headlines. Then I recently read The Observer critic, Rowan Moore, also write about the Tesco effect in architecture.

Parallel information, parallel opportunity

I also use research that we had gathered from doing fellowships and from teaching in other parts of London. Conversely what I discover here may help elsewhere. This intelligence of other urban strategies at play might help our strategic plans for Albertopolis in relation to the Royal Parks.

On for this project when we were able to make use of the Flickr geo-tagging which was discovered in our initial studies as part of my built environment research fellowship for the Royal Commission for the Great Exhibition of the

11 Building Futures debate: This house believes that London will become more trouble than it’s worth. RIBA. 1 November, 2012
12 A paraphrase of Frank Lloyd Wright’s observations on Broadacre.
of 1851 and reinforces that this wider contingency of the city as people must be addressed.

Hidden constituencies
Who were the hidden constituencies at play here, the different groups of people that would not attend stakeholder workshops or participate so much in the public life of the city in an ‘official’ way but instead occupy public life on the margins?

To that end, when the competition is won, we are drawn to the huge injustices done to the patients and visitors, let alone the workers, of University College Hospital situated within our site area, on a stretch of urban freeway and dark one-way streets, where all sense of nature is throttled.

Here the notion of any amenity connected with the Hospital extends no further than a view from a hermetically sealed corner cafeteria within the building. It is inaccessible from the street but right next to ordinary passers-by on the pavement, as if cruelly mimicking a shop-front. It overlooks a few trees set amidst a congested traffic junction and an underpass at a near-stand still but has no access to public green spaces within at least 400m of the hospital itself. We felt this should inform our own brief that we brought to the table, along with our client’s original requirements. We advocate for this constituency to have a voice and to demand access to open space, and brought with it design options for new pocket parks next to the hospital and easier access to UCL’s fantastic public green courtyards.

Making a presentation
After very few chances to review where we stand with our client and our evolving sense of where the design might go, we are suddenly presenting the suggested public realm improvements to an important London audience. Our ideas are informed by the same qualities we find in our work, but our consciousness is now more evident.

A Boardroom Presentation
There is a group of perhaps 20 people sitting in a boardroom awaiting my introduction. This gathering of senior business stakeholders is effectively one-third of the client group, balanced with political leaders and officers of the next third, and the final third representing what I would term ‘real people’. It is the third group that focuses our research on the ground, the second that perhaps steers, influences and funds most of the work, and in reality it is the first group that ultimately controls the future the success or failure of the project. Ultimately it is their city of exchange, commerce and culture. It is their risk-taking and speculation, their entrepreneurism and power play that underscores what we are being asked to do here: To create the city as a prosperous point of encounter.

We care about the economic case, the data, the facts and figures. We chase after retail trend reports and business improvement District plans and their lists of priorities we see if we can do “both/and” to quote Venturi, to achieve the goal of creating a great piece of genuinely public city at the same time as fostering economic stability.

To answer their questions I source answers from our pool of empirical, first-hand research and practice, not just anecdotes or preconceptions. How will a new ‘Front Door to London’ offer a much-needed welcome to the city for those arriving from the north? At the same time, how will it improve arrivals from the south, as Crossrail disgorges tens of thousands of new visitors to the area every day. Where only a chasm of traffic currently exists there will be a series of new public spaces, short cuts and places of pause that will act as an enormous welcome point.

Already my mind is racing with connections...
Making it personal
Successful projects allow us to build a critical social relationship with groups and to consolidate connections and shared interests and concerns. We do not just make a submission where technical competence alone is the key criterion for evaluation.18

We flourish, it seems, when we have the chance to develop a conversation with people; to be able to listen and respond; to negotiate between interests and reveal unheard voices and hidden qualities. This nurtures a fundamental condition of exchange between all of the people involved on a personal and professional level so that collaboration can be established. We can demonstrate our ability to balance between competing issues and use design as a process of embedding values in a proposition and design as action given the very public nature of the commission we must follow through and act on our convictions at a strategic design scale.

A drawing attempts to explain my working method: in a snapshot of a moment’s consideration at the start of a project. This is the first time that the threads are unfurled to see if an active methodology is evident in how design ideas grow and are shaped, and to understand my role in this.

How are commissions and cross fertilization encouraged between sources, thoughts, influences:

—
It is like taking one’s mind for a walk
—

By making a collection of sketches about our design methodologies, the process drawing called "In an hour of one evening" helped to reveal the interventions that my role assumes in the practice: Sometimes it is through listening alongside others and sometimes it is about leading other designers. All the time I am looking out, alert to outside forces that can be utilized.

Rather like a lightening rod or conduit, the role I seem to have developed (and that anyone may be able to replicate, perhaps) is that of conducting together the flow of possible energy sources which might drive the project forward, alongside our more rigorous formal research agenda. I place the project "in the path of luck," gathering a sense of it being charged,19 so that it will generate meaning, value and duration.

Design Actions/Design Values
Each event, or remark, noted on the diagram relates to the overarching desire within the studio to embody the values that form our “studio ethos” as well as our client’s brief. This ethos is reinforced through action as well as design per se.

For clarity I have called these interventions "Design Actions". Without them, it is questionable as to whether architecture with any meaning, beyond pure accommodation, would or could take place.

In fact, without the "Design Actions" our particular type of architecture would not take place and our values would not come to the fore and influence the outcome. For this reason I have named the things that we believe in as "Design Values". They are, I think, specific to our studio and our authorship. We might share values with other designers but only we apply these values in the specific way we do through our actions.

Effort
This kind of active, live reflection on how we design is something we had not acknowledged before within our studio, even though we have a conscious design

17 Locally from Camden, internationally from Europe via St. Pancreas and from the rest of Britain via Euston and Kings Cross).
18 We receive the brief for Tottenham Court Road and, in an extraordinary stroke of luck and what we would advocate as good practices, we have the opportunity to meet the client during the bid to ask questions, before we submit.
methodology that sets out specific processes. This new assessment has clearly revealed both the value and necessity of actions, and it demonstrates the laying bare of process to an extreme degree.

It is both daunting and rewarding to see how much effort is expended to get to the point where architecture can be generated that ultimately achieves the level of sophistication that we can hope to demand in all of our work.

Simultaneity

The complex requirements and demands that each unique commission entails has become clear during this process. It demonstrates undeniably that along with artistry and inspiration, being able to 'spin many plates at one time' is a key attribute at the beginning of the 21st-century for a designer in their activity. The ability to avoid closing down lines of enquiry too soon or to prevent oneself relying too heavily on one's preconceptions is critical and has to be actively championed in practice.

In effect our studio is a purposeful vortex of design emerging from data, brief requirements, human relationships, memories, challenges and interrogations, communications and instructions. Overarching Design Values keep watch over all this activity and and wait to see how they can be brought down by Design Actions to participate and inform the search for new forms of beauty in architecture.

19 This is a word Edmund de Waal also uses, when work gathers a momentum and powerful meaning, it is especially resonant in the manner that simultaneity and multiplicity generate a resonance form the manner of reading things side
In an how one evening...
Restating The Aims Of Architecture: Discovering Why Architecture Must Never Stand Still

Architecture frames our culture. Society is wrought with contradictions and conflicts, injustices and exclusions. At the same time culture can be used to embrace generosity and a sense of inspiration that transcends great divides.

Architecture sits at the intersection of these concerns, framing our culture and values, pushing and pulling on everyday lives, just as it is pushed and pulled itself, always evolving. Grand ideas, however lofty, ultimately have to meet the ground and it is our role as architects to mediate the transition of what is, in essence, a collision between fragility and desire – or as we have also termed it, infrastructure and intimacy.

Is our architecture about trying to mitigate conditions in the face of imminent crisis? Is it true that ultimately, ‘all that is solid melts into air’? Is our architecture trying to satisfy this disposition, or is it trying to be reassuring or just allegorical? Is the ‘New Beauty’ I uncovered as one of our core aims essentially a preoccupation with revealing this contradiction, this poignant balancing act? Is the New Beauty a sublime Baroque paradox that comprises both potential joy and agony?

And what of my individual role? Am I stating the obvious or claiming that we need to restate the very aims of architecture in order that we can go forward with real meaning?

Engaging in a process of reflective practice has allowed me to understand the trajectories present in our work, and to define the values underscoring it. This process has been iterative; our values have necessarily been recalibrated in response. This reflects both my growing understanding of the work, and a desire to define the qualities, or characteristics of architecture we have made during twelve years of practice.

This has not led to a static position, or a treatise of architecture. It uncovered a process of interpretation which leads to a non-typologically derived architecture. Our architecture is engaged with context and morality to define its own sense of beauty. This sense of beauty is revealed by forcing engagement and questioning assumptions.

Equally, it is informed by my personal compulsion for architecture to be understood as an act of agency – it carries the power to instigate change. Architecture can promote values and engage society on a broader level.
Restating The Aims Of Architecture: Discovering Why Architecture Must Never Stand Still

Aim: To improve human conditions

- Authoring
- Incomplete, ever-changing, and evolving
- Searching for new beauty
- Engagement and self-awareness
- Sharing architecture - democratic, inclusive

Specific to place + responsive environmentally

Economy of means

Globally awake

Culture = social manifestation of values

Never an object = always a social experience
Answering Back

During the course of this research, I have asked whether our architecture has the characteristic of ‘answering back.’ This trait is full of contradictions. In the first instance, it implies a response that is alert and part of an exchange between interlocutors. However, when young, we are often told off for answering back, perhaps for speaking out of place but more commonly for questioning the status quo a little too much. Sometimes, unsettling questions need to be asked and ‘answering back’ can conversely be praised as a spirited enquiry or purposeful determination. Trying to know more, trying to do more, trying to not accept things without questioning our preconceptions can be the cause of friction. The aim of ‘answering back’ at DSDHA is to create a beautiful retort, to respond knowingly.

I want to make architecture that responds and that demands a response. Our aim is for architecture that is concerned with human needs – however large or small, now and in the future. We want to embrace the grand scheme of things; to claim a role for the architect in every aspect of any environment that we inhabit. These environments shape our common, shared experience, right down to the detail. Over centuries, architecture’s voyage to define itself has not been not fixed, and architects must respond to circumstances, steering a way through the orbits and trajectories crossing our path.
Considered in this way, architecture is not so much about the need to 'answer back' as it is to force acts of engagement. What we do is about place and context; the local alongside global networked realities; sustainability and emotional connection woven together in material narratives. Writing this thesis coincides with the publication of Ros Diamond’s review of DSDHA’s Alex Monroe Studio in the Architectural Review. It is grouped under the thematic issue of ‘Network Specificity.’ This is a reassuring affirmation of the importance we place on our architecture engaging with a non-static framework of interests, or network of influences. It is a conscious shift away from traditional ordering structures of society, which are at once grounded but exclusive. What I had considered to be a desire for a building to ‘answer back’ is not so much a conscious desire for a design that demands attention for itself, but for it to demand engagement with its audience. This helps to define its sense of place, purpose, emotion or openness in the city; it is the built pursuit of simultaneity.

Capitalising on non-static notions of the city, [the project] works with a quality of dynamic instability, a theme already discernible in some of the practice’s earlier works ... [offering a] distinct architectural response to its collaged surroundings, not retreating from the city but engaging with it.2

Facing oncoming traffic

Above all, it feels as if DSDHA are in a position to ask these questions because of our studio culture. We state that in order to understand and respond to a situation, we must put ourselves into someone else’s shoes and project into the future. We believe it is important to experience for ourselves what it might feel like for the people we do not and cannot know – our clients-in-waiting. We think it is necessary to ‘stand in the middle of the road, in front of oncoming traffic’. This allows us to anticipate a view that we can only imagine. It questions how things might turn out, provokes conversations about design, place, and people; asks how it will really feel to be there.

In order to achieve this we cannot stand still

There are orbits and trajectories that must be charted in order to author and shape one’s own progress. To be critically aware of this self-determinacy is an empowering awakening that the PhD has given me and that may be pertinent to a wider audience.

A ‘good’ project

These orbits extend across enormous territories, and constitute the ether through which a project must travel in order to arrive at a place where we can say, with justifiable confidence, that a DSDHA project is ‘ready’. It must have been tested and hewn sufficiently to reach this point. When it has arrived, it is self-determined “to speak for itself” as David Hills says.

These orbits are extensive. A ‘good’ project should be able to fight its corner when scrutinised by each particular sphere of people who form the collaborating group involved in the project. This defence is not motivated by an ambition for absolute alignment or resolution aimed at perfection. Rather, a project should create its own sense of independence and balance; recognising and speaking of its potential.

Within a project, references are immediately made between our professional studio as a practice and many other realms. These include an extensive list: our academic research; our personal first-hand experiences; our responses to other people’s stories; feedback from public engagement; our alertness to new technologies and new social habits; well-researched references to other cultures, history and emergent phenomena on site; sketching; prototypical model making; ad hoc ‘dérives’ through social media, new virtual worlds and

1  When I was at architecture school, the Situationists, inheritors of Surrealism, were a key influence for many students.
2  Ros Diamond, Alex Monroe Studio, Architectural Review, August 2013
A "good" project
emergent kinetic studies; movement and view analysis; historic overlays; environmental integration; the investigations of intimate personal landscapes. All of these aspects are read alongside infrastructural know-how and technical expertise.

In see this process as a journey – it is not confusing or disorientating to be aware of so many issues simultaneously. This act re-engages us with the kinetic way in which we interact with the wider world we occupy. This world is both physically present and held in notional space via our imagination and new technologies. When regarded as a journey, the evolving complexity of architecture can be held in a manner that makes it a welcome attribute, where layering adds depth not obscuration.

**Deliberate Incompletion**

Our demand for multiple references when determining a project perhaps anticipates future conversations. What is evident in the approach to our work is a conscious desire for a degree of incompletion. This is thought of in the sense of laying open a narrative which is completed only by the future occupants of the spaces or buildings we design. The way our spaces are used is another orbit of enquiry. It overlaps with many other orbits, between interests and passions, necessities and desires. Each pull and push against each other to move a project on.

‘The Silver Building in the end was a project as conversation – an on-going conversation about duration in the city: a recognition of the combined dynamic and kinetic effect created between things, and simultaneously a feeling of gravity and memory, binding us to the more persistent aspects of physical objects and architectures.’

— “Conversations”3

How do we reveal a place that it is not yet visible? How do we reference the historic layers and stories that form the foundations of a piece of city, without being overly controlling and choreographing experiences and events too much? It is only with a deliberate choice for incompletion that architecture can remain open to future interpretations and engagement by unknown audiences.

During the interrogation of our projects

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I was asked where ‘doubt’ lay in the work. On reflection, in seeking incompleteness, I think doubt is expressed every step of the way. To counter it we have to take action and push our ideas forward. Through purposeful collision, a project is exposed to several influences simultaneously; this also insists it is ultimately never complete beyond formal or contractual definitions. A project is ultimately a temporary event over which we can exert an influence, at whatever scale. For us Design Actions are as important as Design Values.

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It’s about ‘Making Things Happen’ as much as it is about ‘Making Things’ themselves

—

Creative practice/critical practice
Considering other forms of creative practice in parallel, such as art or music, is a way to pull back from seeing architecture as purely a public service. It is a way to access a world less weighted by gravity, professional responsibility and obligations. Experiencing other forms of creativity takes us into the realm of ideas and desires. It allows expression of certain evident truths in an abstract, emotionally connected way. We insist that architecture also has this capacity to move people.

A conversation about art practice helped to reveal the search for new forms of beauty in our work. It clarified why awkwardness was important as a means of communicating contemporary values and situations. It relates directly to craft and making, and the visceral connections experienced by those who respond to the properties of manufactured objects.

Being able to re-connect with this aspect of our practice – how it is related directly to other forms of cultural production – has been a gift. It also reminded me of my earlier interest in art – a career trajectory that I seriously considered but did not follow (even if I did go to Art School, twice). Art connects us not only to our clients who are artists but also to those for whom art is a key part of their lives.

For example, Simon Silver, one of our clients, recently remarked that my explanatory presentation of the ideas behind a project were “just like Richard Hamilton’s drawings.” He thought they explained and unfolded meaning, even though I had not consciously attempted to reference Hamilton’s work. Reflecting on our work with Simon, it is clear that our client–architect discussions are wide-ranging. The design process is genuinely iterative and this helps me to realise the critical importance of making evident one’s own personal preoccupations within a creative collaboration. It provides a source of inspiration and cohesion.

This awareness goes beyond the importance we place on making annual submissions for the Royal Academy or even our insistence of calling our practice a studio, and never just ‘an office’. It is fundamentally about restating our place in art culture, and reclaiming the architect’s role therein. It is an active part of our identity and the way we work, so I now take time to explain this to our clients. We are not like most architects, we do things differently, we make and think; hopefully, we do things better.

This is key to DSDHA’s way of seeing the world. Annotating the handmade drawings of the PhD takes place in a room overlooking a yard of studios. The room is surrounded by original works of art by Edmund de Waal and Franz West, overlooked by Joseph Beuys pieces and our own cast aluminium silver trees from a collaboration with Rebecca Cocks for Hermès. We have created a working environment that actively seeks to stimulate the design process with sources of reference that provoke actions. In this manner I am reminded of Alexander Calder’s fascination with words that describe the influences of his work:

4 See Appendix for DS History. I chose to go to an art school in Edinburgh to be in the company of artists. I now teach within one.
5 Simon Silver is a Director who leads design at Derwent London and with whom we are working on a new building in Fitzrovia at the moment.
6 See Appendix for all PRS Sheets.
7 Franz West light and Beuys photographs are both from Large Glass, a friends’ Gallery. Joseph Beuys, “Coyote”/Photographs by Caroline Tisdall, Franz West welded, patinated steel 1988, www.largeglass.co.uk.
8 Refer to the Hermès project (See Archive for full list of DSDHA Projects).
Chapter 4

DS sketch, "Richard Hamilton on Richard Hamilton"
‘How can art be realized? Out of volumes, motion, spaces bounded by the great space, the universe. Out of different masses, tight, heavy, middling—indicated by variations of size or color—directional line—vectors which represent speeds, velocities, accelerations, forces, etc … —these directions making between them meaningful angles, and senses, together defining one big conclusion or many. Spaces, volumes, suggested by the smallest means in contrast to their mass, or even including them, juxtaposed, pierced by vectors, crossed by speeds. Nothing at all of this is fixed. Each element able to move, to stir, to oscillate, to come and go in its relationships with the other elements in its universe.

It must not be just a fleeting moment but a physical bond between the varying events in life. Not extractions. But abstractions. Abstractions that are like nothing in life except in their manner of reacting.’

—Alexander Calder
From Abstraction-Création, Art Non Figuratif, No. 1, 1932.[ also include as a footnote]

Collaboration is consciously authored
By seeking external influences, we also actively encourage a sequence of formats that we use in the studio to enhance shared collaboration as a team. These range from coming together as a studio over lunch once a week, to going ‘out and about’ with colleagues and students to look at architecture together. We also take opportunities to reflect on what’s happening day-to-day, or casting forward well in to the future. This reflection extends further – right down to a discussion of ideas with friends or colleagues from outside the studio, who visit to offer insights from a new perspective.

This collaboration is not accidental. At the same time it has become clear that my personal interventions always aim to move purposefully away from the project. They are intended to draw in new perspectives, to cast a new direction, to challenge preconceptions, to bring fresh insights that often get forgotten if collaboration is not consciously authored.

By pulling away, gathering more energy, more purpose is revealed in the project. The values of a project as it stands at that precise moment have to stand alone. The action of pulling away and consciously seeking to occupy the margins is a key contribution I bring to DSDHA but also to a wider audience.

Our iterative process of design-to-be juggles several orbits. On the one hand it pushes instability and incompleteness as a critical foundation for creativity to flourish. On the other hand it demands inclusivity and social awareness as anchors at an ethical experiential scale. Eschewing stability and firmness in our design process means that our built projects simultaneously create a reassuring well-grounded place of real meaning, duration and comfort. Simultaneously, they carry the excitement of new urban memories, so that cumulatively the project will constitute a cultural contribution. The way we do things hopefully sets out an agenda.

With the benefit of this research, DSDHA has reordered the design review process. My engagement with each project is less formal and less of a performance. Instead of leaving the studio to use our large review space, we often stay in situ now. We use our studio as a workshop or laboratory where we can work in tandem to simultaneously investigate and solve a number of related issues on the project. Anyone can take the role of lead orchestrator of the investigation, and collectively we review the strengths and weaknesses of the propositions that appear. However, I remain conscious of my role as an author at all times and likewise remind everyone of their respective authorship within the work they are testing and developing.

Academic Practice
This system is not dissimilar to how I teach architecture; we set out to deconstruct an issue over the course of an academic year and achieve this through a variety of methods. We work side by side with students, asking questions and testing possibilities. We have refined a group-led response in which individual students have room to express their point of view in their particular thesis design project and I, as a practitioner, share my discoveries to the wider student audience. In academia, the same ethos of our studio has encouraged the opportunity for conversations, seeking a common trajectory and sense of
purpose, but with the delight of a partially unknown destination.

Our academic practice is not considered as being distinct from our studio because, for us, theory and practice is a continuous enquiry; a quest for knowledge and beauty. Our collegiate attitude to teaching is similar to our manner of creating a collegiate practice, where all members of the studio contribute and ideas of the group are curated.

This cross-pollination will have an opportunity to be tested through my involvement in establishing a new London School of Architecture ⁹ that has an aim to operate beyond the academy and to integrate studio learning with practice, creating an exchange between both that is of mutual benefit.

**Authoring Architecture and Agency side by side**

Keeping trajectories moving is an integral part of our mode of practice. I have held a role that focuses on how and where I must judge if it is appropriate to intervene and to influence design outcomes. In this way, my authorship does not have to follow a linear path. It is a social and design-based skill. Working with different groups of people in differing scenarios is something I really enjoy.

In order to achieve the best outcome for a project, we must use our abilities to outwit constraints, to rewrite policy, defeat red tape,¹⁰ use intelligent reasoning. We are 'artful'¹¹ with the best intentions and, of course, responsible.

The nature of authorship is key to making critical and self-aware architecture that is relevant to the human conditions of the future and today. Being an author is a both a precise and random process where a project might be said to be 'placed in the path of luck', rather than being forced along a predetermined route. Assumptions are overthrown, and the process arrives at a point where it seems to lead to its own autonomous sense of being. At this stage, it seems to have an internally-derived and specific logic that no longer depends on the architect as author. In our case, we ask if is a project sufficiently 'DSDHA' enough to pass muster, having been tempered, tested and interrogated by our own choreographed projections. Yet most importantly we ask if it can it take on a life of its own?

In order to retain authorship, and simultaneously address the immense challenges of our role, we have to display confidence in our ability to work at many levels – from the strategic to the detailed; the technological to the social – demonstrating our expertise. We must declare our skills loudly.

We have to be able to avoid unnecessary compromise but carefully balance competing interests. We must be diplomatic and respectful; alert and engaged. We need to act in everyone's best interests. If this involves new ways of behaving as an architect we should not be defending the 19th-century notion of a 'title' as retrograde professionals. Instead we need to ask ourselves what we can do to create relevant architecture in the future – with or without a title.

The act of authorship means that I am compelled to defend a project's aims. In so doing, there are times when some sort of confrontation is necessary to ensure the best possible outcome. There will always be times when temporary friction is a necessary part of achieving a project.

The expression of authorship in the context of collaboration is no less important, but it is often misinterpreted as being in conflict with the notion of shared endeavour. The

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⁹ The London School of Architecture proposes new model of teaching architecture combining working in a studio to learn practical skills as well as traditional lecture courses and design modules.

¹⁰ DSDHA had to defeat irrelevant regulations on the William Bellamy School where we decorated windows with silhouettes of local fauna as a reference to the children’s delight at seeing animals on their journeys to school. Building regulations stated this was not an acceptable manifestation as there was “not a box for red fox” to tick. Of course we deftly proved otherwise demonstrating that the guidelines set out in the regulations has been amply been met. See Archive for full list of DSDHA Projects

¹¹ A quote from Lisa Fior of Muf, in response to Farshid Moussavi, during external examining feedback on the work of DSDHA’s Unit at The Cass. Fior spoke in relation to the need for architecture to encompass agency and the role of being an architect and not just making architecture.
Each journey takes on a life of its own
potential is perhaps more easily understood through the analogy with other forms of art. In comparison with the performance of a great piece of music, I have recognised that my role to orchestrate the score of a project does not mean that I need to take centrestage in its performance nor try to play all the instruments. There should be space for others to demonstrate their virtuosity. Without writing the score however, the music could not be performed. Equally, the strength of collaboration may allow an unexpected dialogue to emerge that would only add to the expression of the work. This expression is perhaps the most difficult of the categories that I have sought to measure or understand in our work. It is the idea of New Beauty.

A trajectory towards craft and New Beauty
In August 2012, two simple revelations occurred. I was in Venice for the Biennale and, having set out the travails of making the terracotta architecture of our South Moulton Street Building, the architectural critic and historian Peter Davey asked: “The way you’re talking, Deborah, makes me think that you are perhaps the last architect in Britain interested in craft.” Before this moment I had never considered craft as a key aspect of our work. I knew we were fascinated by materiality but its making had not come into focus as our preoccupation.

Later that day, after I had given a talk, a woman approached me to let me know that she had, “always loved the way you use colour in your architecture”. I asked her to explain, as I was shocked that she thought this was the case. We consciously try to avoid using colour as a component of our work. She clarified that she saw colour in the way we find a tone or hue in nature and enhance it so that it reveals a quality derived from a natural phenomenon. This ‘colour’ becomes embedded in the material resolution of our buildings itself. Her insight made evident an aspect that is present in our work but had gone unnoticed. It was so accurate that I was surprised we had never been able to articulate it so simply.

Generations of my family have been builders, so making is something that was in my blood but that I had not previously investigated in detail. Before the PhD, I had not made the correlation between my confidence in the know-how of assembling a piece of architecture. I wasn’t intimidated by construction, with the great efforts we go to in our designs that achieve materiality which embodies values. This goes beyond simply being contextual and relates to a deeper connection with the natural environment. Our effort is about one condition, and that is craft.

My father was a horticulturalist; my mother a classicist and teacher. They created gardens and built houses together. Their

12 At the moment it only seems that the male lineage is known in terms of professions, but clearly the females were entrepreneurial and physically active women who could also build.
13 I had even constructed my own first projects for friends and family myself as a student-cum-contractor, as if to master the craft first-hand..
academic and landscape sides coincided in what I happily can acknowledge as a kind of my 'back history'. My recent appreciation of such design influences has opened up potent conversations and connections that would not have happened without this PhD research.

Our latent interests in landscape and form underscore our interpretation of New Beauty. Ultimately all architects seek to create beautiful buildings, but it is not enough to define beauty by personal taste, which is a reflection of personal values. Our desire to use craft, the act of making, is to make something extraordinary out of what is natural. We have an emphatic desire to manipulate a single material, with an economy of means, seeking out a primordial or visceral connection with nature. We have a fascination for the natural forms around us, which cause us to ask how their existence is possible. For example, the erosion of a cliff that is at once stable but unstable; composed but weathered; and reveals histories both past and future.

The interpretation of craft and landscape in our work perhaps reveals how these components define our sense of beauty. This is at once known and unknown, and is arresting in some way. It demands interrogation or engagement. It is transformative.

DSDHA create brilliant, stimulating environments that treat their users intelligently. But its Sure Start Centre in Colchester is the most astonishing, turning an overlooked addition to a town’s modern landscape into a civic monument. 14

In the midst of potential adaptation, change, or compromise, our focus on introducing beauty at every opportunity is a manifestation of seeking engagement; finding beauty in the unexpected.

Orbiting: Design Values + Design Actions
The research has developed a point of view which posits that, in order to know what an architect is doing as a member of a studio or in their own right, they have to define their own
particular Design Values and Design Actions. Design Values are personal and specific to the practice. They relate to the surrounding culture and are uniquely personal. These values generate a practice-specific set of themes that underscore authored architecture as opposed to simply ‘buildings’.

Design Actions are activities that run alongside Design Values, so that the traditional role of the architect as an active design professional is evolved to define each individual architect’s behaviour.

Our way
In our case, the mode of practice is one of sampling, colliding, scanning, sketching, then listening, editing, testing, overlaying – and more sketching. It as about using a ‘workshop’ space similar to a laboratory or dance studio: it is a place of choreography, a place for creating ‘encounter’ during design.

We are unburdened by past projects, nor worried about work we may or may not make next. We insist on having an active engagement with the project, bringing it into being, making it a reality, occupying the present. Each project is relevant, fresh, full of potential.

Accepting Both, not Either/Or
We have to insist that the culture of architecture rejects the binary ‘insistence’ to segregate academic theory from practice through an oppositional relationship. The notion of learning to be, and continuing to learn as an architect, needs to be recast. It should become part of a studio-based form of ‘critical practice’ that could compliment more formal educational routes. The boundaries between enterprise, delight and scholarship should be blurred alongside those of technology, social innovation and an appreciation of history.

Yet how can we encourage continued learning and reflection from practitioners themselves? To ask that they consider their bigger role in society, when they are caught up in the stress of making architecture and dealing with the next problem? How can we look across the scales not just within projects but within our practices too? What happens if you really look closely at what you are doing?

Agency & Architecture, side by side
Alongside architectural education is one’s agency as an architect, where there are roles one can adopt or develop. I have come to accept that there is a part of our practice which hopes to set about reclaiming a new role for architects. An Agent-Architect who produces new types of architecture and accepts problem-solving at a broader scale, beyond the confined realms of the built environment. Could this be a nascent awareness, reclaiming the role of the architect, to become New Architects fit for the 21st-century?

Learning from the PhD – The way we work
Today, DSDHA is a “unique assemblage”\(^{15}\) of gifted individuals working on amazing projects. Each person has his or her own history, ambitions, hopes and talents\(^{16}\). DSDHA is a place where ideas and people collide, in a purposeful choreography of chance and purpose.

Until recently, the ‘practice’ side and the ‘academic’ side of DSDHA were parallel endeavours. They were linked by only a few people and a few intermittent updates, reporting back to the respective other side. They were coexistent co-authored entities but were not really part of one accessible entity, apart from myself and David. A consciousness now informs the unity of all parts of an organisation or culture, including ours. We have reached an explicit realisation that the culture of a studio is, like a design, authored. As a director of the studio I play a critical role in shaping and influencing it.

Very recently, the way of understanding the structure of this unison and of ‘designing a future way of life’, has been reappraised, asking what formal structure or business model best represents an attempt to avoid a ‘corporate’ culture and instead nurtures a collegiate, more perforated hierarchy where everyone plays to their strengths.

15  This phrase was coined by Charlotte Bronte on visiting The Great Exhibition of 1851.
16  See Appendix for List of collaborators (past and present) at DSDHA.
Learning from the PhD – the future

At this point we must ask: Has the PhD changed the way we work and the way we might plan for the future?

Individually, I think we will probably be inclined to speak out more, act on issues with a new consciousness and make evident truths that I feel should be acknowledged.

A key aim will be to defend beauty – in all its diverse modes – as a core component of design that demands disciplinary integration.

The consciousness this study has bought to my mode of practice has led to a new way of considering the work we make. Our work will continue to be about bringing consciousness to the world and the betterment of human conditions but perhaps we will declare this more precisely. Importantly, my conviction will also be used to demand that those around me are equally vocal in articulating aims. The creative milieu in which I thrive is one where I am surrounded by people who demand a similar level of engagement, and who feel compelled to answer back.

Our win of The West End Project, as set out in Case Study II, was definitely connected with the research. The PhD has given us confidence to play to our strengths. We have used new tactics that have been made evident from research into our way of working.

One can see that all our projects have been positively affected by being authored in a different way today; we are testing out new methods tailored to suit each situation. Will our work be more kinetic? Will it be like when Frank Gehry discovered the technology that enabled him to think differently and to generate new types of form unlike his earlier work? Or might the new perspective created through this PhD bring about more permanent conversion, like when Calder saw the work of Mondrian and then abandoned his figurative art, instead experimenting with the abstract and mobile never to turn back?

The results of the PhD have heralded lucidity about the manner in which we make our work. That these traits have always been there is not to be questioned, rather, they have been brought to the fore in our behaviours and qualitative decision-making, our ethical position, and our overarching aspirations.

In the future, we will hopefully pursue areas of our practice with which we feel an affinity relating to our core values. City-making and development at an infrastructural scale are our passions and there is much to innovate in this realm, which we will act upon. Within the arts there is potential for us to engage in a type of work where the narratives of the experience within the building are the very raison d’etre for the architecture; until now we have not actively pursued this. These buildings represent a cultural civic realm that offers a new domain in which we think we could contribute a fresh approach.

Resisting inertia, we want to stay alert, local and dynamic. We hope to bring depth to our team, to maximise the way in which collaboration and contributions can be meaningful for everyone. We want to make a place where discoveries are shared and where different voices come together to be heard and tuned, based on an underlying score.

We are honing our skills, with weekly technology lessons at the studio and for the students we teach. These improvements of skills are based on where our projects have not necessarily gone to plan and where doubt and risk have had to be met head-on.

Our presence in the world is shifting both physically and virtually. A new website is about to be launched, and we will move to a new studio in Vauxhall, a location in a maelstrom of change and heterogeneity. Here, new development hits historic city and diverse people come together. It is our kind of place.

We will continue to engage with the public about exactly what we do and why. The story of the Covert House is emerging, chrysalis-like, and will probably be promulgated in great detail with an agenda to share New Beauty and the art of agency with the wider public.

A book, How to Make it as an Architect, is underway, as are potential plans for a role in shaping a new school of architecture.

We are embracing change. We are determined to always engage and to keep moving forward.
## Archive

### Projects

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How can a shelter be stripped back to the barest essentials and kept as simple as possible?

Amid the outhouses and gardens walls of a Georgian Farmhouse in Norfolk, a contemporary structural glass orangery for a citrus expert and an academic acts as a filter between a series of gardens. Three existing walls of brick and flint stone were retained and a new completely glazed structure added for the fourth wall that then folds to become the roof. The room acts as a winter home for citrus and a summer reception room.

We worked with local craftsmen on lead work and cedar joinery, as well as a specialist supplier for the structural glass. The new building is essentially a glass lean-to with laminated glass mullions and beams, with the addition of a new simple paved floor and timber panelling. It is designed as a transparent device for viewing the landscape. Once the new project was complete, we serendipitously discovered that Joseph Paxton’s mid-century glazed lead conserveratories at Somerleyton Hall nearby also deploy the same set of parts.
John Perry’s head teacher observed that growing up in Dagenham probably means coming from a home where the television is on a great deal and where most journeys are made by car, so that engagement with nature and the wider world is limited.

As a school is the first public building and institution that a child usually engages with, it is of huge social and educational importance. The head teacher challenged four teams to design a masterplan for a purpose-built nursery, along with a daycare centre that would be built two years later. The project would question assumptions about how children can engage with learning.

Set within a socially challenged area, the project was developed by listening closely to the client’s needs and aspirations – in particular the ambition to connect the children with the landscape in all weathers – hence the large column-free shelter in the nursery under which the children can play. The main studio spaces are flexible and well lit, and compliment the landscaped activity and outdoor teaching zones.

Technically, great care was taken to use economic industrial materials that echo the suburb and the nearby Ford Motor Works. This created a sense of quality and unexpected scale, while maximising environmental benefits and relating to the local culture and its heritage.

Both buildings share a family of details while maintaining their own distinct identities as children begin their journey through primary school.
How do you respond when asked to build on an open, public space in the centre of the city?

In this project the notion of exchange was a key design principle: Could we design a way to compensate the loss of green space by creating a new type of landscape?

As a key feature, an innovative vertical hydroponic garden covers the front elevation of the building, creating a new type of garden that inspires and educates. It goes some way to mitigate for the loss of greenspace. Used for the first time in a UK Public Building, the green wall system was invented and adapted for integration into the Children’s Centre by the landscape architect, Marie Clarke.

Working closely beside and engaging with local residents, an active community building has been created which is both iconic, like a billboard, and yet welcoming. The building provides a crèche, training facility, nursery and cafe. The nursery reveals its creative activity through a large picture window onto the street and the cafe interior claims generous views to the park and beyond.

A diverse client group including SureStart, Islington Green Space, Islington Play Association and the Paradise Park Group steered the process from a competition to design the new building as part of the regeneration of a run-down urban park through to completion.
Edges of towns are marginal places where disparate uses exist side by side. St Anne’s SureStart acts as a meeting point of such various conditions: a main road to Harwich, a footpath across the Heath, playing fields, housing estates, allotments and an old community hall. It is a place where people can come together and an emerging sense of civic encounter can develop.

The form of the building, developed through extensive testing and consultation, channels the sense of the location being an outpost that overlooks the surrounding landscape and draws people in. We later discovered the site was used as a gun emplacement to defend Colchester from attacks in WWII. Somehow the site seemed to channel a sense of being a strategic ‘look out’. It was alert to the community; it defended the common ground on which it stands while also beckoning people in.

The building is purposefully awkward in its composition, communicating a new kind of beauty. At times it looks like a collection of buildings, at others a single entity made from timber and concrete. It is designed to provide quality community facilities which respond to the immediate context of the neighbourhood, its topography, and the social need of the neighbourhood. Its dynamic undulating form creates an identifiable entrance to Parsons Heath, encouraging local enjoyment of the new facility and the Heath beyond. The triangulated roof is an undulating ‘landscape’ which can be seen from many angles and levels, surrounding roads and green spaces, creating a local landmark.

As one enters the glazed entrance hall, it is as if the building melts away, preventing it from feeling too institutional, intimidating or enclosed. A first-time user can walk in and consider staying but know they can easily leave if preferred. The project includes two halls, a children’s crèche, spaces for emerging businesses local societies and clubs. A glamorous staircase elevates an ordinary experience into a special moment.

The project received few British awards but was nominated for the European Union Mies van der Rohe Award for contemporary architecture, perhaps hinting at how new forms of architecture can sometimes take time to appreciate.
St Anne’s Sure Start, Colchester
St Anne’s Sure Start, Colchester
The existing Primary school is set in a

[34x17]180

[253x581]The existing Primary school is set in an expanse of lawn, surrounded by a low-grade public space which is dominated by transport infrastructure near Dagenham Civic Centre. Despite its name, it holds very few signs or symbols of an emerging collective urbanity.

The new Children’s Centre attempts to alleviate the monopoly of 1960s council housing by creating a new kind of public space that spans between the suburban and civic aspects of its context. As if acting as micro-urban architecture it is close to other council amenities – town hall, maintenance depot and relates not only to the tower monopoly of the local setting but also to the industrial language of East London and the Thames Gateway.

With its bold formal language to the street that is part-shed, part-civic institution, the scale of the building is manipulated to suggest a grander urban status than its actual size belies. Visitors are often surprised that the building feels intimate and welcoming when they arrive at the front door, despite the initial forceful impression.

The brief included child daycare areas, play spaces, nursery, community accessible multi-purpose meeting rooms, staff and ancillary accommodation, and the provision of outdoor space. To counterpoint the raw aluminium external cladding, a sense of protected shelter is described by the generous verandah facing the garden spaces. Based on local children’s observations of the animals they enjoyed seeing on their journey to school, we worked with graphic designer, Oliver Klimmel, to develop a decorative wall and glazing treatment to the children’s spaces. Its domestic quality allows a subversive camouflage that includes foxes, rats and worms, juxtaposed against the industrial characteristics of the building’s public face.
Draw your favourite thing, plant or animal in the garden.

What do you like seeing on the way to school?
Edmund de Waal Studio
—
2006

We collaborated with Edmund de Waal for the first time in 2005 on the design of a studio in Tulse Hill, South London. It was a modest, introverted space with unexpectedly wide-reaching social aspect. As the shape, light and disposition of the spaces evolved within the rough walls of the workshop, we – the architects and the potter – talked about the social aspect of making. We discussed spaces where conversations would be had, where ideas could be exchanged and might take flight, spaces that would allow for retreat, where one could think, or pause. Together we imagined a place that might allow Edmund to stand back from the world, yet simultaneously explore. It was a space for framing enquiry and research, while sensing the city beyond. Conversations often turned to bigger spaces beyond the yard outside the entrance, the ad hoc mews set back from the run down high street. People and objects came and went, to other local places or further afield.

As architects, we were aware that what was being proposed in architectural terms must not draw too much attention to itself. The studio was to be robust and carefully placed, with the primary concern being the disposition of the light in each space over the day. The blackness of two concrete forms, holds the point of arrival, with a moment between inside and out. What had been a workshop remained resolutely that, eschewing any over-glamorisation: kitchen, downstairs; desk in the attic; the wheel in the top lit studio space.

Hélène Binet came to photograph the new studio when it was complete, just in time to appear on the cover of the catalogue for Edmund’s exhibition at Kettle’s Yard, Cambridge. The image was a literal representation of where the potter happened to be at that time, and at the same time critically established a sense of setting for the narratives collected within: the reciprocity between the objects and the architectures from which they came and in which they were ultimately positioned.
The two pavilions adjacent to a new London public space, Potters’ Fields Park – one a new café built of privately owned space, next to City Hall, with public conveniences, ATM point, maintenance plant; the second pavilion a community owned café in the shadow of iconic Tower Bridge, a Grade I Listed Building. As a highly contested and legislatively complex environment the design process required negotiations at a number of levels. Models, sketching, public engagement and planning discussions underscored an iterative development of proposals. Both buildings deploy stacked horizontal timber; one made of charred black, the other of a lightened calcified appearance.

The form of the buildings was derived from an analysis of anticipated and actual movement and views on the site, and relates to the English Landscape tradition of grottos and groves as intimate places within designed gardens. A huge cantilever on the Parkside pavilion over-sails what is designed as metropolitan open land. It provides public shelter whereas Blossom Square Pavilion (since demolished) crouches at the base of the bridge’s stonework tort with strong energy belying its small scale.

A sense of the past seemed to have been erased in Foster + Partners’ slick architecture yet anecdotes from local people related how the site was subject to severe bombing during the WWII. This emotive, hidden history is reflected in the precarious form of the architecture and in the use of sculpted, almost damaged, external cladding. This was the first time burnt material was used in the UK, using a method developed through first-hand testing by DSDHA, prior to our awareness of the similar traditional Japanese technique of Yakisugi.
Potters’ Fields Park Pavilions
Potters’ Fields Park Pavilions
Where paths cross, new urban situations evolve – in particular, where infrastructure inserts itself through a town. In exchange for the tremendous disruption this can cause, great care must be taken to understand and reflect on these consequences and to see if the change is of benefit to local people.

How can architecture improve these inevitable sites of conflict between communities and wider strategic initiatives?

In 2004, DSDHA won first prize to redevelop an underpass created by a freight railway line running close to the town centre, which effectively cut off the residential part of the town from the shops, civic amenities and the River Aire on which the town was founded. People literally bumped into friends here and a nascent public space existed. The underpass acts as the main pedestrian gateway into the town for over 10,000 people a day. Even though well-used, the original, late-Victorian structure was made an uninspiring entrance into the declining town centre.

DSDHA initiated radical improvements to the derelict underpass, both at a detail and wider scale. The existing 1890s underpass was completely rebuilt and now includes a multi-faceted and generous shelter with room for people to rest, a new public space, and landscaping. Working in collaboration with artist Martin Richman, they introduced new lighting and a flock lining to the new concrete structure.

Likewise another Victorian construct was demolished with our help. With a local historian we unearthed anecdotes about late-night assignations in the underpass, which explained the bridge’s popular name of ‘Tickle Cock Bridge’ rather than the official prudish ‘Tittle Cott Bridge’. Together with residents the redevelopment reclaimed its original name.

DSDHA also identified and championed land swaps in the area, which helped fund the development.

The project challenges pre-conceptions of how the less ‘significant’, incidental places in our towns deserve well designed infrastructure to compliment the more prominent projects that regeneration attracts, as well as being applicable to wider scales of infrastructural intervention where future disruption could be mitigated. Here, everyday life is improved for thousands of people at an intimate and immediate level, working in tandem with the town’s marketplace improvements and the new bridge. The good news is that shops in Castleford are now opening on Sunday whereas in the past the centre was empty.
Tickle Cock Bridge
Tickle Cock Bridge
Historic places tend not to be straightforward, especially in old cities such as London. Soho is a place where people tend to get lost, and enjoy doing so. Disorientation and discovery lie in its dense network of lanes and alleyways, and the feeling is one of teetering on the threshold of risk, while not feeling too threatened in reality. This is a precious spatial and social quality that we did not want our architecture to undermine.

Beak Street, originally named Silver Street, was laid out at a time when there were only carriages on the road with narrow wheelbases that did not need a large turning radius at street corners. The buildings are so close together that most are seen only obliquely rather than face on, and corner junctions are tight, obscuring longer views; shadows prevail between the close-set buildings. People navigate the streets by reference to visual anchor points close at hand rather than via landmarks or long vistas.

DSDHA’s unique planning consent for what will be one of the first modern buildings permitted in Soho since Richard Rogers’ Broadwick Street development started in 1996, represents the faith both our clients and the planners have placed in us as designers of key, complex urban sites. A very particular and well-crafted response is critical. Our skill at redesigning the city simultaneously, on a number of levels, means that DSDHA’s design is both innovative and respectful – hard to pull off.

We were selected to replace other designers who could not secure permission to demolish the existing locally-listed building, which limited the redevelopment potential of this major site in Soho’s historic fabric. The mixed-use scheme is known as the Silver Building; the name references Beak Street’s lost 18th-century name of ‘Silver Street’. It was originally laid out alongside Golden Square as part of a speculative development.

The building will be clad in ceramics designed in collaboration with the artist Edmund de Waal.

Our conversations with Edmund focused on how to register traces of this story within the final built form; how this would aid orientation subliminally through the dark streets and bring hints of delight. Its façade of glazed ceramic tiles would be carved open to allow a glimpse of an internal, sunlit courtyard. Materiality, light and the framed view of life beyond the street frontage combine to become a point of reference in an otherwise permanently overshadowed street.

We wondered, could this be an architecture with a kind of latent registration? One where you might glimpse something new or overlooked the twenty-fifth time you walk by, discovering a new significance or gesture that talks back to you? In answer, a seam of handmade porcelain tiles was placed, within arm’s reach, in the elevation of factory-made ceramics with a slightly silver glaze. It generates a dialogue between something specific and the mass-produced things that it had been made to sit among.

Assembled together, these components define an act of architectural communication that hints at the conscious making and remaking of cities over time. This is also registered through the subtle embedded elements. Composed of handmade components, simply glazed and embedded in an otherwise completely industrial ceramic, the manner of constructing and, most importantly, the nature of authoring architecture is bought to the fore at a personal and intimate scale. It may remind people that this incidental building on a street corner was the result of a conscious act of design, which had come together layer upon layer.
“Silver Forest #36”, was a temporary installation by DSDHA and Rebecca Cocks to transform the Hermès flagship store on New Bond Street, London into forest of silver trees for Christmas. In the 18th century, this location was the border of the city and was originally a forest. To celebrate this, the pavement, store windows and interior were transformed with thirty-six cast silver birch trees – some reaching 8m in height.

Eighteen of the shimmering cast silver trees were installed into the pavements of New Bond Street and Bruton Street, along the Hermès boutique axis. The forest continues into the windows and throughout the store’s ground floor. Passers-by could explore the iridescent forest, touch the wintry surface of the metal and feel the ‘bark’ etched with the patina of the silver birch. In the background, the sound of birds and horses’ hooves galloping in winter snow could be heard.
The Collaborative Learning Environment provides a range of new interactive conference facilities. It required highly serviced and reconfigurable environments to provide expansive spaces capable of subdivision into small clusters. This flexibility was required to allow groups to engage with projects at a range of scale and differing degrees of autonomy. Simultaneously, based on an increasing awareness that learning continues outside dedicated teaching areas, The Møller Centre requested enhanced and enlarged break-out spaces for interaction and the informal development of ideas.

The calm interior conceals sophisticated and high-tech IT and communication systems which enable the building’s flexible configurations.

The Music Centre comprises a recital room for performances, a suite of practice rooms and an acoustically isolated recording studio. A sleek glass exterior is modulated to reflect the landscape, and filter views to the highly controlled interior. Internally, timber lining softens the sharp geometry extending the materiality of the trees inside.

“The space has been very popular with clients and has been used in many different and exciting ways. It is a tribute to the vision of our clients, our staff here and to the architects who translated our ideas into reality”

Gillian Holdom, Director, The Møller Centre
The Møller Centre, Cambridge
The Møller Centre, Cambridge
Christ's College

Christ's College is a 700-place Church of England School where one front door welcomes all pupils, staff and visitors into a central atrium. It creates a strong focus for the school community and embodies a vision of the school as 'One House' with spiritual and pastoral values. Faculties benefit from an exceptionally high standard of teaching spaces and facilities, which assist the College in realising its ambition to become a specialist College for Sports and the Performing Arts. The Sports Hall and Theatre were specified to professional standards and are also used by community groups and specialist clubs in the local area.

Christ's College incorporates a technical innovation that places student well-being at the fore. Classroom heat recovery and ventilation systems are built into the façade of the building and, using heat transfer, they create a well-balanced environment for students, allowing fresh air into the classrooms all year round. The external 'breathing wall' adapts traditional masonry technology to create a dynamic environmental façade which integrates the heat recovery units in the classrooms. The wall is perforated to create a 'contemporary dovecote' which allows the air to pass through the brickwork façade.

Pond Meadow

Pond Meadow School is a special needs "through" school for children and young adults, aged 2–19, with severe, profound and multiple learning difficulties.

The new single-storey building is designed around the concept of an evolving journey through the building; every classroom is different with its own particular views and spaces. The overall layout is organised around three courtyards marking the three zones of the Lower School, Upper School and shared Community areas. Classrooms are located around the perimeter, maximising natural light and ventilation and allowing direct access to secure and sheltered outdoor play areas.

The differing eye levels and differing degrees of special needs of the pupils of all ages inspired the different levels of the windows.

The roof form undulates along the length of the building reflecting the diverse accommodation below, which includes a hydro-therapy pool, sensory reading area, art studios and specialist ICT provision. These allow the children to appreciate their individual journeys with views of sky and landscape beyond.

"I've been inside and outside the school. I find that when you go past the school you look twice at it because it's such an unusual-looking building."
In DS's work, user participation is used as a positive counterpoint to food being too hot, too cold, and in using, eating, and going into use.
1F
Food Tech
Science
Drama
Recording Studios
Maths
ICT

2010

252
We received a call in 2008 asking if we’d like to create a new building in the Athletes’ Village as part of the masterplan that was predicated on providing a legacy for London. Post-Games, the temporary Athletes’ Village would be transformed into permanent housing for Londoners. We had in 2007 competed to be on a short-list from 300 applicants. Ultimately we were selected as architects of what is now known as Vesta House.

At the time we had not completed a single housing project. So the act of faith by the Olympic Park Delivery Authority and Lend Lease in believing in our ability to deliver a 120-apartment block was considerable. Such commissions, based on people’s trust in us a studio, has been key to our success to date. DSDHA was the youngest practice selected to design a key part of the Olympic Village.

As a gateway tower on a unique triangular plot our building is unlike the standard square mansion blocks in the masterplan. We had to resolve the ambitious brief of making great homes for rent or shared ownership after the Games, in what was then the tallest building, and despite the tight deadline, always sought innovation.

When we arrived on site we found a tabula rasa and drew deep to find connection to a context which had been stripped bare in preparation for the Games. The chalk seam lying just beneath the whole of the site and the River Lea linked the building conceptually with its wider natural environment. The facade of the building draws inspiration from local geology, echoing the idea of a sheer cliff face. Bespoke lightweight GRC panels were prototyped and developed to achieve the dynamically carved and chiselled elevations. The design is crucially informed by its environment and has been specifically evolved to anticipate the new taller buildings that will surround it, as the area becomes more dense. Daylighting is maximised for all residents in the future. The journey for each resident has been considered at a detailed level seeking to improve on the level of amenity typically offered in affordable housing. Internally an atrium 12 storeys high floods daylighting on all floors, creating a shared community space, therefore avoiding the predictable anonymity of high-rise living. Upon opening the door to each apartment, a view is offered directly to the outside world, which reconnects the domestic with the wider world.

The architecture close up is dynamic and almost approaches the passer-by as
DSDHA’s flagship store in Mayfair lies at the junction of South Molton Street and Oxford Street in a global maelstrom of people, commerce and transport connections. It was awarded planning permission by Westminster City Council after a limited competition. We were put forward by the local authority in a great act of patronage even though we had not yet realised a built project in the borough. The mixed-use building, which includes residential, office and retail houses the first European headquarters of Chinese menswear label Bosideng, and is clad in high quality, bespoke terracotta.

The design responds to many influences on the site and its unique position and proximity to the historic route of the buried River Tyburn and it attempts to respond to the rhythm and nuances of its heterogeneous neighbours and create a new local landmark to help way-finding and nurture a sense of place where none existed before. Extensive testing at both the design and detail stages in terms of form and striated articulation has given the building a wrought simplicity that rewards further discovery from repeated inspection. It is as if the building asks many questions and answers them.

The urban design makes use of the distinctive short cuts and alleyways to improve movement. Westminster City Council said the building would “undoubtedly add further style and elegance to one of the most fashionable streets in London,” and the Evening Standard named it “London’s answer to the New York’s Flat Iron Building.”
The South Molton Street Building
Over a number of years DSDHA have been evolving an iterative long-term strategy for the future of this historic gardens and its immediate urban context, located within the Vauxhall – Nine Elms – Battersea (VNEB) Development Area. It lies at a strategic position within the network of green spaces in this critical emerging part of the city. The framework plan is now used to allocate public funds and private S106 Contributions for much needed regeneration in the Gardens and nearby.

A number of phases of work have been implemented, including a new tree-lined square and sports pitch, improved lighting and most recently a new, welcoming entrance to the park.

Future plans include changing the left over roadside spaces next to the park and railway hideout the Albert Embankment into new public spaces including a market space and cafe terraces on the riverside frontage, and new active pedestrian and cycle connections along the substantial new landscaping.

The new gateway aims to celebrate the spirit of the Pleasure Gardens through the introduction of two monumental columns, framing views into and out of the park. At the same time, the proposals create a new entrance on the street, enhanced tree planting provision and improved safety through clear sight lines and lighting.

Based on our design, improvements have now been made to the flank wall of the well-known Royal Vauxhall Tavern with the introduction of a green wall and plans for a future potential performance space.
Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens
Alex Monroe Studio, Snowsfields — 2012

Why does this large addition to a very small building appear unstable at times and simultaneously, stable and of its place? How can the handmade cladding be both at once, crafted and industrial? The scale of the ** is both defined and scale-less. Alex Monroe has been successfully making jewellery in Southwark for 25 years. In 2009 DSDHA were asked to develop his new jewellery studio in Snowsfields, within the Bermondsey Conservation Area. The studio was to provide a showcase for Alex’s growing business which was previously based in Iliffe Yard, alongside DSDHA’s architectural studio. The proposal adds a hand-crafted three-storey element to the existing Edwardian single-storey shop front, providing sales, workshop, studio, meeting and dining spaces as well as a roof terrace with views towards London Bridge.

The new building operates as a ‘bookend’ to the original terrace, creating a strong prow to the street frontage. The proposal maintains the continuity of the shop front, whilst the additional floors form a separate ‘container for crafts’, which sits lightly above. Ecologically minded, the addition is made entirely from prefabricated timber panels, the use of which has removed 27.1 tonnes of CO2 from the atmosphere. Internally this simple structure is left visible. The raw finish provides a robust setting for the studio where all the built-in furniture has been made from the same timber specifically for each part of the jewellery making process. Over time the timber will reveal a patina of use, recording day-to-day life.

Echoing the nature of the activities that are taking place inside, the building’s façade is precious, precise and carefully made. Ellis Woodman in BD said, “The building makes a picture of the world around it, drawing seamlessly irreconcilable parts into an artistically considered whole. In a London that grows ever more heterogeneous by the year, it is a strategy that carries continued relevance.”

The façade is clad with high quality pigmented zinc, inspired by the wide range of materials visible locally, whilst having a slightly dark grey-bronze tonality. The lustrous finish subtly picks up on the surrounding buildings and their diverse tones and colours, and change in luminosity over the duration of the day.

Spacing of the vertical ‘fins’ on the elevation are selectively shifted in front of windows to animate the facade and control views in and out of the building. This introduces dynamism to the street and articulates the building as a micro-tower in the company of both the Shard and Guy’s Tower. The rhythm of the facade is accentuated with a double-height glazed area on the south facade, across the workshop and meeting room levels, offering unobstructed views to the surrounding area.

As in Alex’s original Iliffe Yard studio, sliding doors to the workshop open onto the street allowing engagement with the outside world, providing a place to extend one’s view as a counterpoint to the close work of the jewellers within.
The driving principle behind the designs for Abell House and Cleland House is to create two new residential buildings that respond to their unique location and context. The proportions, massing and materials are in keeping with the surrounding high quality buildings and enhance the local environment by building on the area’s characteristics.

The proposal will replace two dark and formidable ex-government buildings with two new buildings that are uplifting, light, welcoming and which create a positive contribution to the streetscape. It is intended to create two buildings, that are complementary yet establish their own identity. The scheme also responds to its location on the edge of two significant Conservation Areas, with an understanding and analysis of the historic context, which is fundamental to the architectural response.

Cleland House forms a prominent corner building addressing Horseferry Road and creates a gateway to the development. The articulation of the façade responds to its axial relationship with St John’s, Smith Square to the north. It is considered that an ‘urban imprint’ from the 18th-century Baroque church has been applied to the facade and this has lead to an emphasis on vertical articulation to establish hierarchy. The roof line gently recedes, resulting in a classical ‘casino’, or outside room, which offers delight and intrigue at high level. This echoes the way St John’s towers take on an aedicular form that suggests occupation and an animated skyline. The inner layer of the façade is composed of vertical fluted semi-glazed ceramic panels.

Abell House provides a transition between the ‘modern city’ to its immediate north and the Millbank Estate and Tate Britain to the south. The size and rhythm of the vertical columns increase in frequency as the building transitions from ground to upper storeys and the proportional sequence of the horizontal pre-cast banding break the elevations into a classical composition of base, middle and top to create visual hierarchy. Behind the outer pre-cast tracery, balconies are inset providing sheltered private amenity space.

A generous triple-height entrance lobby is aligned with the axis of a popular pedestrian route giving views through to the gardens and creating a feeling of visual permeability.

The proposed landscape, designed by Wirtz International, acknowledges the importance of views from the street and the transition from street-to-lobby and lobby-to-garden; from public to private, as well as the possible amenity that landscape can bring to the passer-by.
Appendix
Deborah Saunt Dip Arch RIBA

Professional Experience

Since 1997  
DSDHA  
Founding Director with David Hills  

Previously worked with Tony Fretton, MJ Long, Sandy Wilson and Van Heyningen & Haward, London. Macy’s interior design and visual merchandising department San Francisco.

Related Experience

2009–Present  
Member Editorial Board, AD  

2009–2012  
Advisory Board, Campus de la Paix, Geneva, Switzerland  

2007–2012  
Advisory Board University of Cambridge School of Architecture  

2005–Present  
Chair of the Southwark Design Review  

2010–Present  
Chair of the Wandsworth Design Review  

2010–Present  
Member of Transport for London Design Review Panel  

2002–Present  
The Architecture Club Committee  

2005–2009  
Chair RIBA Premises Committee  

2008  
External Design Advisor for the Olympic Delivery Authority  

2008  
Speaker at the World Architecture Festival, Barcelona  

2007–2008  
Presenter, Grand Designs Trade Secrets (two series) for Talkback Thames/Channel 4  

2005–2008  
CABE Enabler  
Exhibitions including V+A Museum, Wonderland and Royal Academy.  
Lectures on DSDHA at RIBA, Architecture Foundation, ICA, RSA  
Broadcasts on architecture, for BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and BBC Radio 3 & 4 and Australia channel 9.  
Published internationally in Architectural Review, Blueprint, Architects Journal, A10, Icon, Vogue, Guardian etc.

Judging

2008–2012  
Chair and judge RIBA Awards Group  

2009–2010  
Jury Member Competition New Museum of Fine Art in Lausanne  

2008  
Jury Member Concours Maison de la Paix Geneva  

2007  
Judge American Institute of Architects Awards  

2007  
Judge British Construction Industry Awards  

2006  
Judge RIBA President’s Medals & Gold Medal  

Teaching & Research

2010–2012  
Research Fellowship in the Built Environment, Royal Commission for the Exhibition of 1851  

2008–2010  
Invited Professor, EPFL Lausanne, Switzerland  

2009–Present  
Diploma Unit Master, The Sir John Cass Faculty of Art, Architecture and Design, School of Architecture  

1998–2002  
Diploma Unit Master, University of Cambridge  

1997–1998  
Diploma Unit Master, Royal College of Art  

Architectural Association  

2013  
Research Fellowship ADAPTR Programme, RMIT  

Qualifications

University of Cambridge, RIBA Part III  
University of Cambridge, Diploma in Architecture RIBA Part II  
University of Kansas, USA Exchange Programme  
Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, BA Architecture RIBA Part I
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<td>RIBA Award</td>
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<td>Young Architect of the Year Award - shortlisted</td>
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<td>Winner, BCIA - Small building project</td>
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<td>Best New Practice - Architect of the Year Awards - shortlisted</td>
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<td>Pieter Zitman</td>
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When considering the “selective” groups in which others have (or have not) included us between 2003 and 2013, the diversity is enormous and demonstrates our span across the culture of architecture. We are included in Lucy Bullivant’s Anglo Files (but not her consequent New Arcadians); selected to be in The Architects Journal’s 40 under 40 (but not Young Architect of the Year); included as the youngest firm of architects on The Architecture Foundation’s Olympic Village shortlist (out of over 300 entries), but not selected to be in Design For London’s framework even though our submission greeted guests at the entrance to their Offices and was included in their Shanghai Pavilion exhibition at the World Expo. In this analysis, there is not consistency in how our studio is perceived, though any omission from what might be seen as the in-crowd does not give cause for us to complain, when we have been lucky enough to have been on various top architects lists, such as The Times “Young Turks” or the “Best British Architects”, and have been both shortlisted for The Stirling Prize and winners of BD’s Architect of the Year.
April 2012

In setting out a grid as a neutral framework which from within a review of the projects we have made over the 12 years can take place, it is clear that few formal continuities exists. In essence, by their diversity, the projects speak of a challenge to a preconceived notion that architects tend to have of a single, identifiable formal architectural rhetoric, or a limited aesthetic and based on a purposefully self-limiting discipline of restrained expression. Conversely, these wide ranging projects manifest an energetic enthusiasm, with a sense of control and rigour nonetheless, and they appear as a strongly authored work not a random out pouring of a studio over time.

Initially, before this matrix study in April 2012 the projects were considered as evidence of a preoccupation with our architecture as occupying the realm between a technological and social landscape. The narratives and the analysis were very much less to do with architectural form and skewed.

An urban sensibility within buildings was named as 'Micro Urban environments.'
This framework is produced as a reference tool, from which the initial scoring/assessment or metric gauge was carried out to compare project attributes as a way of developing an overview of the studio’s output from 1999-2012. It allows a certain distance, and an overview to lead trends or preoccupations.

Shrouded in the trees, the first published image of house that can’t be seen, and that was until then purposefully removed from public gaze. That it has been kept out of public view has been a question that has preoccupied the final phase of this research project. Why would one project alone be kept out of view, when so much of the work is offered to scrutiny and laid bare, would this one project be concealed?

November 2012

And why do so very few urban design projects merit an image in this picture gallery? Is there still an ‘object focussed’ emphasis that needs to be scrutinised and interrogated as it goes again so much of what DSDHA hopes to stand for?

And why do the events and cultural initiatives not warrant a mention on the list?

April 2012

And where is Snowfields? Perhaps the project that best embodies the ideals of DSDHA, “The last craft-based architects in Britain” Peter Davey, Venice 2012

Future Projects
April 2013, this work by Ed Ruscha is an anchor for the research, since discovering it thanks to a trajectory that came out of the other Ruscha reference image of the Standard Gasoline Station. It goes beyond the clear links that his painting of a new and as yet unrecognised form of beauty offers, and here posits the notion of something being ‘done on purpose’, with an intent that is not purely expressive or representational but actively seeking to provoke or agitate the viewer into having a specific, targeted response.

From reviewing each previous presentation in a chronological order a sense of evolving narrative can be appreciated, but conversely, a sense of repeating the same tropes makes one feel on the verge of entrenchment. Of course, one can also see how the gathering together of material for review in one event has acted as a stimulus to propelling forward with new ways of reading one’s own work. Looking at key issues, distilling, and refining has helped enormously with new projects and opportunities that present themselves to DSDHA.

Reflecting on progress so far, a summary of past 3 powerpoints is included as a way of jettisoning that particular linear and transient presentational methodology, instead re-turning the pin up a fixed, less hierarchical exhibit with duration. The very method we use at DSDHA as a way of laying-bare a process leading up to the formation and development of a design (and of course a shared discipline with teaching an academic being taught as a student) And it reflects also the seminal moments of reflection within our studio where it is evolved or changed course. It was in 2003 when we were designing St Anne’s Colchester that we consciously deployed a formalised review process for the first time. When a series of models were made, parameters established and a conscious input to our new found methodology applied. Before that when DSDHA were in the first space we had 8 people the process was able to take place at our one large table around which we all sat. But when we were forced into 2 rooms we had to adapt.

So how would we have changed if we’d had 1) more space or 2) not grown so much? Or most probably 3) would we still have evolved a methodology as we have always been searching for structures and theories and resisting the notion of ‘un-sundered’ authorship preferring instead the layered meaning acquired by a design process and collaboration. Remembering Jane Drew’s dictum that ‘Architecture is 10 people thick’.
Upon completion of the sale of her home to us, Baroness Denham handed on this copy of a letter she'd found under the eaves in the attic of the house when she'd bought it in the 1960s. It is a speculative letter dated 1871 from an Estate Agent asking the owner, of no. 23 Broadhampton Road if he can buy his back garden (a builder's yard) so he can build his own new house. This was built between 1871 - 81 and was named "the Avenue" a grand name for a humble backlands development. By 1950 status of the house had been aggrandised and was known as The Farmhouse, a fictional name made up to shift the pretensions of the then owner from entrepreneurial development to something more embedded in history.

This in time became known locally as "the oldest house in Clapham".

A child stands in the garden. To make this project happen has taken personal effort and commitment, as well as time. The best dreams take a long time to come true perhaps.
All the work inevitably is underscored by “deep” historic references that manifest our preoccupations over time.

The choice of an image of a child and an old man is a conscious reference to the cross-generational duration of making. He is a craftsman and the child looks on and learns, but also looks apprehensive. This is new territory. The acknowledgement of craft has been a key revelation of this reflection on projects and our way of designing. The very making of things, the resonance emotional connection between the material of an existing site, the effects of human labour, the embedded creativity of the makers themselves, is a trajectory still to be explored.

The term “New Beauty” is preferred.

Can a typology be applied? An everyday anchor image to explain the origins of the design?

A reference to shared US experiences, of study trips.

The Woodsman
Making stories for the future.
Environment
Skills
Experiences
New friendships
New collisions
Also purposeful risks being taken.
In choosing these images rather than just showing a project or explaining, precision and chaos are juxtaposed, instead of using traditional architectural representation.

Infact, the reality of the project is still obscured on these sheets, and it is as if the project is either an abstract object in model form or a building site.

Sections, plans, spatial patterns or a sense of materiality and occupancy are yet to be revealed. It is still private.

Also our actions extend to also walking our clients and collaborators through the studio to discuss the work and how we go about it.

This is important as, without this passage Mark would never have seen the model, made the remark or helped the rhetoric of our design methodology evolve.
This is a new project; urban design and landscape. It is the largest extent of the City for which we have been responsible. But strangely it seems manageable as in our practice we commonly map huge territories or diverse domains.

Inventing a new term - “The Primark Effect” - how the city shifts its shape and form as people recalibrate the sense of a destination when a new attraction arrives. In this case, at both ends of Oxford Street there has been a Primark Effect, whereby new visitors extend their experience beyond their usual known boundaries to visit a new attraction, and thereby change the shape of their understanding of the West End of London itself, and in turn values shift, neighbourhoods change and thus the edit “the city is where the people choose to go” is proven true.
November 2012
The sketch, referencing
The Wordsearch, diving for pearls
The technological landscape
The City is where the people chose to go

April 2013
Now looking over the scope of our practice’s interests, themes can be clearly seen: using new technologies to reveal real time experience using research to delve deep, to claim historic fact to avoid the xxx reference and turn nurturing new narratives in the xxxx that are grounded but unsentimental.
The manner in which we do it: The Actions of a Project

Public Discourse and Agency inform the design output, as it places the work in a dialectic between studio discussion and more formalised devices for collaboration with new people, ideas and new forms.

The Clairon call that any new opportunity can offer: What change can we make happen?

Question one’s first impressions so that preconceptions are acknowledged. We believe we should “Never Assume”. These are early aims declared at our formation as a

Time for reflection is and has always been a key stated aim of our practice, it is one shared by past collaborators and clients.

Our efforts do not go unnoticed, and by chance an opportunity.

Appreciating our growing expertise and that collectively we embody a great deal of knowledge.

The critical role of the sketch: Making time purposefully for this to take place, “to hold the pen”.

Management of design process to actively be collaborative with the studio beyond the team itself.

Consulting a wider, nonprofessional, audience for their opinion, appreciating and recording their invaluable insights, for example Daphne’s observations on the redefining of the West End with the opening of a new fashion store. The Primark Effect.

Working to the limit

Environmental sensitivity

A former client emerges as a potential partner in designing a narrative

The very act of “drawing the idea” allows other projects to develop too, as it stimulates prompts for other forms of agency and design ambition to happen in parallel: “It’s as if one good idea reinforces another”

Design Values = Design Actions over time = Studio Ethos

The environment that enables good design to flourish.

This kind of reflection on how we actively design has never been done before within our studio, and it demonstrates the laying bare of process to an extreme degree. It’s both daunting and rewarding to see how much effort is expended to get to the point where architecture can be generated.

Complex requirements and demands that each unique commission details become clear. It demonstrates undeniably that along with artistry and inspiration, being able to Spin Many Plates At One Time is a key design attribute. The ability to avoid closing down lines of enquiry too soon or to prevent oneself riding on one’s preconceptions are critical and have to be actively championed in practice would take place.
This explains my working method, in a snapshot of a moment’s consideration. This is the first time that the threads are unfurled to see if an active methodology is evident in how design ideas grow and are shaped. How commissions and cross fertilization are encouraged between sources, thoughts, influences; taking one’s mind for a walk; an electronic device at one’s side; a design flaneur.

1. As part of a collection of sketches on our design methodologies, this short account helped reveal the interactions my role assumes in the practice; sometime listening alongside and sometimes leading other designers. All the time looking out, alert to outside faces that can be utilized.

2. Rather like a lightning rod or conduit, my role is sometimes to conduct the flow of possible sources of energy that might drive the project forward alongside our rigorous formal research agenda. I “place myself in the path of luck” gathering a sense of a possible charge that will generate meaning within the site.

3. Here, a remembered walk in July 2012 frames the study of what is considered in an hour one evening.
The first "orbit" diagram from April 2012 tried to unlock the particular components of the process of design at DSDHA and the way it seems projects are exposed to the influence of a series of factors that go beyond formal considerations again and again, during the intensive process of design. These factors are diverse, and are always felt running alongside the formal "professional" design process which is seen in set stages based on completing various tasks in an orderly fashion. However, these new factors are not task-related, nor can they be in the same way the formal architectural themes that have emerged through looking at the work itself. These factors are ever present socially derived "considerations" present that appear to be the foundation of the design culture in our studio, so for example the trips we make, the teaching we do, the parallel interests we have overlay themselves on our projects. However as a representation it appears too static and too concrete, not capturing the dynamic duration of how our projects unfold. The orbit entitled "Oblique Interventions" acts as a sign for the unresolved component of how we design. In fact, I have written "This is the hardest to define" beneath it, indicating more research is required to unpack this key element.

In redrawing the previous orbit diagram it is clear that an aspect of clarity was lost. Little did I know at the time the part which is "the hardest to define" is in fact the key PhD discovery, that the very nature of these "oblique interactions" is where my particular act of authoring within a collaborative process becomes manifest. And coincidentally, it was not until after the penultimate presentation that I stumbled across Brian Eno's "Oblique Strategies" way of working (via my first forays into social media and the joys of twitter which allows chance encounter on a hitherto unimaginable scale, amplifying the very methodology DSDHA respond to).
By reviewing the methodology evaluation used to define the key themes evident in all of our project (see sheet x) it is possible to take a closer look at the status of The Covert House not only as to whether it really was a better work of architecture that one first imagined (which it proved to be, thankfully), but also to use the project laid bare as a tool to see what behaviours or actions accommodated it’s development. What actions were deployed during it’s evolution, and were these actions similar to those we used in our work? Why were these actions undertaken? What was the aim? Are there underlying reasons for them?

The variolating aim stated here seems to be to create an architecture, that is “beyond design”, that is very present, to “create the moment”, to be conscious, to manifest “simultaneity”, to be “active and participatory”, to be “sensory and social, between the concrete and (the) ethemeral.”

And to achieve this, a list of “qualities demonstrated” sets out “the manner in which we do things” which might be summarised as 1, 2, 3 etc.

As research progresses a point of view begins to emerge that deals with what are now termed “Design Actions”, the activities that run alongside the traditional role of architects design process to reveal our own particular way of seeing the world and anticipating our role as a practice that might influence the future. 1, 2, 3.
3. A question. Is agency evident in every project? If I add to + - graph against next three projects (or all other projects) when read side by side to demonstrate how actively engaged we are in a project beyond the traditional RIBA definition of an architect what happens? Yes agency is present in all of our projects perhaps.

4. This then leads to the question of why and how this happens, do we have to ask permission to operate like this? Do we work best when we ask clients to "let us be 'agents'? Or more probably when we allow ourselves to act in this manner? .......

NB Friction alone is not enough

Nov 2012
This re-reading reassesses an unacknowledged but critical project that became known as The Covert House. By re-scoring the project with the benefit of having unpacked it’s qualities in review, but with the same criteria, previously perceived themes such as "materiality", "clarity", or "city" under performing now gain a buoyancy across the board in a refreshing double-take which raises the status of the project considerably. Even through interrogated again only 6 months since the first assessment of all the themes evident in DSDHA’s work it is clear that reflection has yielded a new perspective on the qualities of the project. This seems to support the notion that for xxx of our projects to pass muster and reconsidered “DSDHA” authored, they have to be subjected to a formal review and interrogation so that qualities can be revealed and acted upon. The qualities were there but not been considered holistically. “By making it known”, by manifesting qualities consciously the way we understand the work improves.

2. For the first time should a category be included that could be called agency? Is the sharing of the project between the 2 sides of DSDHA the beginning of a new way of doing things when The way acting in a particularly as demonstrated through a project? In the course of designing The Covert House is there evidence of Agency?

Was it preset when:
- DSDHA + Unit 11 all together on a site visit
- Was getting the site?
- Is telling everyone how to do it for themselves?
- Keeping the site’s original timber, a new form of making

KEY FINDING: THE COVERT HOUSE IS less a manifestation than an example of raised consciousness and confidence for the future.
Nov 2012

1. I can now see how this process alerts oneself to how bringing into focus the role of one’s upbringing on the evolution of one’s spatial intelligence is an important point of reflection to absorb into one’s review of one’s work. It is certainly not a primary focus, but in understanding preoccupations perhaps growing up in the company of craftsmen and of going regularly to building sites might inform my own interest in making, hands on; might shape the confidence we have in craftsmanship being an achievable and highly desirable quality in architecture; and might have lead to our work being firmly grounded in real life building as opposed to move theoretically led, notional themes.

2. Likewise, having a childhood suffused with influences from horticulture and landscape and growing up in a house with a designed landscape and being able to literally shape my own first intentions of building have under the trees, in tree houses, sheds or dens allowed my spatial intelligence to mature very early on, along with literally brick laying and building with my grandfather. Being exposed to different environments from Australia and Kenya would have shaped preoccupations actually with regards to a sense of and awareness of the status of the environment as being crucial components in the design and occupation of architecture and landscape.

April 2012

Another attempt was made to try and represent the process of drawing together the several studies that inform and shape the outcome of the design process at DSDHA. This almost geographic mapping here was helpful in setting out the themes and issues but because of it from an “invisixxxtle confidence”, like a river with tribulations all leading to a single point where it meets the sea, it did not capture adequately the four dimensional, dynamic quality that the process actually entails bouncing between and being influenced by several factors over the course of time. It does however capture the friction between conflicting or counter - instinctual elements and raises questions such as how does the re-reading of a project, or interventions at any stage of the process, effect the outcome; the point when the project is “set sail”, free to be interpreted? How does agency sit alongside spatial intelligence, history and reflection?
Having carried out an initial highly subjective scoring method of running the project side by side to reveal broader studio trends the question was asked: - can another way be measuring the projects' performance be developed? And perhaps this method could be i) more graphic, and ii) able to make manifest simultaneously a larger number of factors than the original 5; then 8: CITY, GARDEN, ENVIRONMENT, AWKWARD, MATERIAL and CLARITY. The categories tested here comprise those of the previous ones but include new categories: about how others saw or reacted to the project. Perhaps by looking at the way people reflected back their opinions of the projects would give a kind of objectivity as if seeing them through a different lens. The 2 categories were interesting to me as I often judge work in a public role, so "AWARDS" is a category which simply records if the project went onto win accolades in a mediated review in a formal judging process, in this case I took the RIBA awards process as a benchmark of a thorough professionally based assessment, as I had on originally been confused by why we won so many RIBA awards when we started out, but perhaps not necessarily for the best projects of all. Why did the projects I’d identified as “best overall” (Sheet xxx category A) not get RIBA Awards, but independently and anecdotally received more positive reactions as well as more press coverage too?

The resultant grid of kite diagrams again shows lopsided projects or projects with only a very limited impact, whilst the successful projects filled nearly all of the respective available fields. Projects in development that were considered problematic or of concern are clearly visible, as they are on their small or 'top-sided' and again the house project is deformed, unbalanced and minimal in terms of scales of success. In fact all projects “in development” were asymmetric.
Design Evolution - The Orbit Diagram

The trajectories of a project over time

Harnessing the project to stay within and to challenge our own design values

Q: Is agency evident in every project?
A: If I add to graph against next three projects (or all other projects) what happens?

YES, AGENCY IS PRESENT.

At 134 Agency =
- DSDHA + Unit 11 all together
- getting the site
- telling everyone how to do it!
- timber new form of making
- being confident enough to confront ‘personal’ as political, sharing revelation in public.

Nov 2012

This re-reading reassesses an unacknowledged but critical project criteria much were previously perceived during GRC3 as under performing now gain a buoyancy across the board in a refreshing narrative. Even through interrogated again only 6 months later it is clear that reflection has yielded results (DS to expand)

June 2013

This drawing tried to capture the kinetic journey along which a project might be propelled during it’s evolution from start to finish. It is an attempt to map or record the roles of the architect as the author of these sequences and exposures through which the project travels, where the architect acts upon the project and allows the pressure or exposure to other influences or factors to shape the ultimate outcome. These influences are diverse, but the architect plays a key role in calibrating the extent to which the project is informed (or reformed) by them. In my case, an idea of a project does not develop in a linear sequence over time, (even though officially it might be seen to proceed through stages). It is not an orderly business. Instead, purposefully and with intent, its progress is subjected to review and scrutiny under many criteria whilst simultaneously, or repetitively, being forced to read or coalesce with many sources of inspiration. These multiple, often contradictory exposures, almost temper the design idea into a stronger entity or presence, so that overtime, it is wrought through these authored and controlled interactions into a recognisable, independent expression of architecture which as a consequence embodies our design values as a practice. To illustrate, on the course of its progress, from the very start and time again, the project will be held up and interrogated; its reasoning questioned to see if it manifests all of the competing demands we place upon it. Does it achieve the levels of performance we recognise in the successful projects we author?
The Performance of Projects Over Time

Were these high scoring projects really our best work? What was going on here to create this effect? And why didn’t some of these projects win prizes, whilst other lower scoring projects did?

Early projects oscillate wildly with their individual scores, going from high to low when simultaneously rising from low to high. Was this a sign of evidence of the inexperienced designer trying to get to grips with the i) complexity of making real architecture, or ii) the search for one’s own voice or way of working?

A surprise observation

The lowest scoring project of all: the architect’s own house

Having tried to distil characteristics evident in our work, an assessment was devised to gather a calibrated overview in a more comparative way, seeing projects side by side. With Tufti in mind different gauges were plotted that enable a direct comparison of the way in which projects reflected the 5 issues in question that the first assessment of characteristics revealed at this stage. The categories were 1) City/Social, 2) Garden/Veranda/Hybrid, 3) Environmental, 4) Awkward and 5) Material issues, against which each project was scored from high to low on a vertical scale from + to -. It is confusing to read at first as individual projects are obliterated and only a general set of trends emerges. The selection of projects (range at the base of the graph, their titles written in a chronological order vertically side by side) was a sampling, from our earliest published and award winning building on the left through to our Stirling shortlisted Christs’ College, and then some of our current unbuilt projects on the right.

Different tones were ascribed to each of the 5 characteristics so that one could hopefully see the progress of this issues evolution over time, where different projects might push or pull on it’s overall trajectory: for example 30 environmental awareness oscillates between high performing and average where as 10, 40 (City, Awkward and Material) span from high to low along the course of time over the past 10 years. If any tendency could be discerned at all, it was a sense that “control” of the projects was getting stronger (so fewer extremely high or low scores in different categories in the same project) but conversely, in losing the extreme, were the projects often having been so tightly scored as high performing between Potters Fields Park and The Silver Building, becoming more middle of the road, less extreme, more comfortable but less critical? Was our output tailing off; with scores sitting across the board in the mid-range for all qualities?

After a preliminary scoring it was clear that certain key questions arose. These are written at the bottom of the page.

- Do the projects become consistently better? Or more of a verge? Convergent but less extreme?
- Where there is an abundance of high scores, is it that the “rules”, the preconceived expectation have been challenged, and a boundary breach/new territory claimed?
- Have any categories become less prevalent or extreme? Awkward is less evident.
- What has improved?
- What remains to be addressed? Why so average no? 3-4
What are the common values and ambitions that we share and who is the potential company we might keep in terms of a community of practice?

And I re-drew diagram "version 2: August 2013 Community of Practice" questioning who we felt connect to other architects and found my expectations and those of others had shifted over time to a broader sense of community which linked us to many other Partnerships - Lacaton + Vassal, Robbrecht + Daem, Diller + Scofidio and even, as Glancey expected, The Smithsons (though separated by decades) or Venturi + Scott Brown and Jane Dew + Maxwell Fry (both key mentors).
Our awareness of these qualities has definitely grown over time ever since we started a conscious design review culture in the studio, and con-
stantly try to reflect on what it is that we do. This is demonstrated here in an assessment in retrospect, the side-by-side strands of awareness
of each quality. Social awareness has never diminished for example but a material consciousness has steadily increased and matured. These
are the “Design Values” that underscore all that we do.
I decided to see if I could draw this evolution of my role as an agent, outside the studio. Through this drawing I realised the degree to which I am upon occasion a provocateur, demanding change for the better, or an agitator purposefully galvanising debate. I am overcome with the need to act upon something, not stand by.

This observation alerted me to the question of how I conduct my part of the business, understanding how projects have grown in size over time, but that we still do small projects; what was the reason for this?

I had to ask, whether understanding success really had to be about inevitable growth (a crescendo) - an image promulgated as a necessity with most practices in the UK - or whether there might be another way of doing things, with a practice of contrasts and variety, and keeping in touch with detail (a counter point)?
By breaking the journey down further, stage by stage in the drawing “Collisions... Revealing Moments of Resistance” it became clear that I play a key role reviewing design options that have been tested, but also in revealing points of tension or conflict in order to ask for new avenues to be explored. It is not simply a matter of liking an approach or not, more a way of trying to provoke an architecture that has an inevitability, a voice of its own. So how do we know if this is achieved?

It is also clear too that ultimately it is usually me who closes down process, and “calls time” on the design to determine if the design is ready or not. But what determines at when this point will be?

Collision technique

What is key here is the acknowledgement that at the points where “sparks fly” in the drawing, there are special moments of key decision-making that take place. The “whole process is buffeted by outside influence, coincidence, stress” via a purposeful “collision technique”, which, in order to succeed, has to be “constantly open to new ideas.” How and why does this happen?
I started making projects a long time before I qualified. For some reason people would invite me to design things for them. The first was for a Summer House in the garden on a listed house that belonged to a friend's parents. We assembled ourselves a 12m long prefabricated timber structure I designed as a viewing device that revealed hidden geometries in the garden.

Gradually, competitions were entered whilst I was employed during my training, then I set up with small commissions and grand ideas, supplementing my income but critically developing a research agenda with my first teaching posts.
On a plane, I try to sketch out the kinetic 'ricochet' of how my mind works when I design, as part of DSDHA, during a project. So much informs the process, beyond purely practical or professional concerns. The numbers of the sequence above relate to points of time, on the journey where the design takes a new turn and develops. Maybe a trip has influenced me, other projects in the studio come to mind or those by other architects across history. I work in the studio, or at home, on the move. What I have been doing elsewhere plays a role: judging, writing, agitating or studying. These all help the trajectories of a project. Being in transit helps me focus.
I tried to note the ways our work and practice is related in parallel to other forms of creative practice, like art or music.

Re-connecting with this aspect of our practice, of how it is related directly to other forms of cultural production has been a gift. I set out a series of connected references to ask, but equally this could apply to music: “connect us not only to our Artist clients but also to those other clients for whom art is explanatory presentation of the ideas behind a project were “just like Richard Hamilton’s drawings”, explaining and unfolding meaning, even though I had not consciously attempted to reference Hamilton’s work at the time.”
This is a picture of DSDHA today, as an assemblage of gifted individuals. Each person has their own history, ambitions, hopes and talents. DSDHA is a place where ideas and people collide, in a purposeful choreography of chance and purpose.

Until recently, the "practice" side and the "academic" side of DSDHA were parallel endeavours, that were linked by only a few people and a few intermittent updates, reporting back to the respective other side. They were present co-authored entities but not really part of one accessible entity (apart from me personally). Now a consciousness has informed a unity of all parts of one organisation or culture, and an explicit realisation that the culture of a studio is, like a design authored, and that as a director one obviously plays a critical role in shaping and influencing it.