Serious Play. A Deltiology of Practice.

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Declaration

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Urban Tactics

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Introduction

Since the mid 1990s Boyarsky Murphy Architects has produced over fifty projects that address the city (figs. 1&2). Some are commissioned projects, many were made as competition entries, whilst some were the product of workshops or teaching. Texts, articles and lectures sit alongside these projects and they represent a significant aspect of my practice which is at the same time speculative, propositional and entrepreneurial. Based originally on the PRS5 presentation that I made in April 2015, I will identify concerns, influences and strands of connectivity that run through these projects and in so doing chart the evolution of Serious Play as an overarching tactic for urban design. Inevitably there are crossovers with the smaller scale built projects when, for example, a project such as a room, a house or even a piece of furniture has resonated with a larger city-scale project to provoke an outcome at a different scale. This has also worked in the opposite direction where an idea for a city has re-appeared in a different guise in a domestic space; these connections run across this work. I have also drawn on teaching projects at various schools of architecture across the world because I continue to find the dialogue with a group of students who are struggling with a given theme and site to be an extremely fertile ground for the testing of ideas and concepts that can re-emerge in surprising places.

I have identified five themes within this body of work which will form the structure of this study:

**Measuring Emptiness** with projects that address abandonment and shrinking cities, animating the void, and tactics of décollage;

**Active Landscapes** with projects that address productive urban landscapes, provisional architectures, environmental layering, and density;

**Scatter Plans - How things Settle** with projects that address fitting, automatic plans, actions to simulate time, serialility and suburbia;

**Micro Urbanism - Survival Tactics** with projects that originate from my involvement with Urban Flashes and address super-contextualism, informal cities, aspects of the Asian city, contested border territories and teaching projects for Athens and Tainan;

**Ludic Cities** with a proposition for a ludic public space that was designed to test the notions of Serious Play and Deltiology and to challenge received monumental tendencies.
These five strands of research and project work are the components of my argument for Serious Play at an urban level. Three relate to activities or actions: to measure, to activate and to scatter, and they propose methods of engaging with the voids and areas of abandonment within the layered fabric of the Western city. This is a development from earlier work published in ‘Action Research’ \(^1\) and suggests how the verb, or action, can break through fixed rules and preconceptions to create a new state of play. Micro Urbanism proposes ways of reading the city closely from the bottom up, which I also call ‘super contextualism’, in order to reconnect different layers and conditions of the city. Ludic Cities is a current and experimental outcome of the PRS process in which I attempt to engage in some of the meta issues of this PhD through a specific project that tests out play and the deltiological method in relation to public space and the monumental. The five categories are not by any means separate and distinct, they are complementary and interchangeable and comprise an à la carte menu for urban play.

The contribution to knowledge of this methodology lies in the way that I have identified and assembled a range of critical urban conditions which I then interrogate in further detail through the development of specific projects. Each project draws on its own tactics which emerge from the particular conditions of the actual site and the contingent nature of our response. These tactics, or responses, can then be applied to other situations or combined with others. This methodology resists the tendency to document, classify and create typologies which can be seen in the work of a broader community of practice such as Atelier Bow Wow, Genpei Akasegawa and Map Office in Asia or the Shrinking Cities and Forensis/Forensic Architecture projects in Europe. Unlike these practices, where documentation can be an end in itself, Serious Play is an engaged and pro-active practice that seeks the transformation of the existing.

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1. Boyarsky, Nicholas & Murphy, Nicola, Action Research, London, 1998. This book can be seen as a precursor to my research into Serious Play and it is referred to in several instances in the text.
City Rat - The City and the City

By way of a prologue I will introduce the two cities that have been formative in my personal development, Chicago, where I lived as a child, and London where I have lived continuously since. Through the course of the PRS I have come to realise that their spatial, political, social, cultural, material and sensory characteristics have deeply informed my own spatial intelligence and ability to read the city. Each city represents to me a particular palimpsest with its own inherent logic and a multi-layered fabric that is waiting to be read for clues in a similar way to the postcard methodology that I describe in ‘Deltiology’. This awareness has given me specific tools and enabled me to identify ways of approaching other cities and it is through the lenses of these two cities that the research has evolved.

Chicago

Chicago in the late 1960s, where I moved as a young boy of eight, was a tough city with an unforgiving climate that was undergoing a painful transition from a confident city of infrastructure and proud modernist traditions to one of violence, racial tensions, disfunction and near collapse. I witnessed the aftermath of the assassination of Martin Luther King and the Democratic National Convention Riots of 1968 when the city was occupied by thousands of members to the National Guard in an attempt to restore order. I remember lying in bed at night hearing gunfire and watching clouds of black smoke as city blocks burnt down. The city was terrifying. I was caught up in muggings and became acutely aware of the divisions between black and white that continue to be so predominant yet unmentionable in America: the elephant in the room. Yet it was also a very exciting time and change was in the air. The existing system and the corrupt city machine run by Mayor Daley was coming to an end, or so it seemed. The Beatle’s Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band had come out in the previous year and with it a world of psychedelia and alternative possibilities. To visit the Loop or have a playdate in Mies’s Lakeshore Drive apartments was to take part in the drama of the city. In retrospect however Chicago taught me to both fear and respect the city and to understand how close such a social construct can come to collapse. The ordered and layered tartan grid of Chicago was both enabling and deeply socially repressive. The city grid contained a multitude of ethnicities yet its rigid structure of exclusion seemed to reinforce difference and to deny communication and connectivity.
Many years later I came upon Ludwig Hilberseimer’s project of 1950 to unpick a section of Chicago’s city grid in the Marquette Park neighbourhood whereby he proposed closing some streets and eliminating others to break the hold that the car had over the pedestrian. This tactic then led to the introduction of linear parks which provided safe pedestrian routes and the opportunity for the introduction of new social programmes. Hilberseimer developed this initial rather pragmatic exercise into more speculative projects such as Lafayette Park in Detroit and then to more utopian visions such the ‘New Plan for the City of Chicago’ 3 where the settlement unit is scaled to the pedestrian and becomes the prototype to replace an entire city. Albert Pope has since written about the emergence of the spine form and neo-modernist urbanism ,4 however what I found fascinating was the simplicity by which Hilberseimer could, through careful observation and then by the subtraction of elements, radically transform an existing district without eliminating it, thereby providing the opportunity for a creative tension between what existed, what was removed, and what was new. Hilberseimer writes about this process beautifully :

‘To solve so complex a problem we must go back to fundamentals. We must learn to see the intricate simply, even naively. We must disentangle the chaos of our conception. We must define our purposes. Only then can we plan and build our cities to our satisfaction.’ 5

The notion that design could be rooted in learning to ‘see the intricate simply, even naively’ led naturally to the work in our publication ‘Action Research’ which argued that the design process could be reduced to simple verbs or actions in order to discover new rules or principles to guide a given project. It also resonated with readings of the work the Russian formalist theorist Viktor Shklovsky who developed his concept of defamiliarisation in his 1925 text ‘Art as Technique’: 

‘The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects “unfamiliar”, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.’ 6

5. op cit.
Meanwhile back to the late 1960s in Chicago where we would spend our weekends and holidays exploring the city, visiting street markets, thrift stores, and antique shops in search of Baluch prayer rugs and, of course, postcards. My father Alvin was teaching at the Chicago Circle Campus, planning the IID Summer Sessions which were to be held in London from 1970 to 1972, and working on ‘Chicago a la Carte. The City as Energy System’. 7 I will return to postcards later, what interests me is Alvin’s use of the term ‘décollage’ when he describes Chicago as an ‘an urban archaeology of peeling décollage’. Décollage is an art technique that, unlike the additive process of the collage, is a subtractive process involving the peeling away of superimposed images (often posters) to create new images by revealing hidden layers. It is a tactic that is similar to the process of peeling back that Hilberseimer had adopted in Marquette Park. Irene Sunwoo has suggested that Alvin’s ‘décollage argues for a broader process of undoing a ‘mechanistic cycle of growth, redundancy and replacement’ unique to America in which the cultural acceptance of technological process sustains its topographical exfoliation’. 8

What I have taken from Chicago, both as a child in the 1960s and more recently, is a critical view of the idea of progress and technology which survives, at best, in an uneasy dialogue with the fluid and ‘base materialism’ 9 of the city and the realisation that working with these voids, redundant and entropic spaces requires specific tactics and frameworks for action.

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9. This is a reference to George Bataille’s concept whereby all phenomena exist at the same level of direct physical experience, for example shit and gold become equal.
London

There are two principal qualities about London that I will highlight, London as a ‘literary’ city and London as a ‘fragmentary’ city. As opposed to Chicago with its potential for an infinite layered tartan grid, London, as an accretion of discrete elements, eludes a clear perspective vision and understanding - all is not what it seems and a curious sense of interiority inflects everyday life.

The literary city I refer to can be found in the work of contemporary authors such as Iain Sinclair, W.G. Sebald, J.G. Ballard, China Mieville and Geoff Dyer. Their London is not fictional in the sense that it is an invented or imagined city: the backdrop is real and it oozes with psychological associations, buried memories and dank matter. Iain Sinclair uses the situationist tactic of psychogeography to create literary dérives across the surface of the city that uncover and narrate both banal and extraordinary associations. The psychological condition of London with its buried memories is further expounded by W.G. Sebald’s wandering writings and in particular his melancholic character Jacques Austerlitz. J.G. Ballard’s London, as described in numerous novels which examine the dystopia of the modern city, is a chronicle of the wasting away of a moral and ethical order in the face of consumerist society and privileged individualism. China Mieville in ‘King Rat’ and ‘The City and the City’ (which I reference in the title to this section) constructs strange parallel and unsettling cities that serve as a strong political critique of the social and class divisions that so effectively fragment London. This literary London is for me a dematerialised and atemporal field of memories, strange layered spaces and eccentric personalities. Working for private clients in London as an architect has exposed us to much of the strangeness, eccentricities and repressed emotions of this literary city and I will explore this in greater detail in the section ‘Fitting’.

The fragmentation of London can be seen everywhere in its social fabric and, whilst in Chicago the grid enforces a strict separation between rich and poor, London is much more homogenous and mixed despite the strict social divisions. Since the nineteenth century, when social reformers researched and documented the poor and the diseases that prevailed amongst them, the wealthy and privileged have reinforced this divide. I have long been fascinated by Booth’s Poverty Maps of the 1890s (fig. 4) because they codify and classify levels of poverty and destitution in terms of colour and location and also because they reveal how physically close together the middle classes, the employed and the poor actually lived. Robin Evans has described this tendency to map out poverty as ‘moral geography’. 9

9. Robin Evans considers architecture, within this context, as ‘a physical geography of moral conditions: the layout of the house mapped the moral condition of the family, and the street layout mapped the moral conditions of society at large’ in ‘Rookeries and Model Dwellings: English Housing Reform and the Moralities of Private Space’, from Evans, Robin Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Essays, London, 1997.
Graeme Shane’s researches on the development of London, initiated whilst a student at the AA, developed under the aegis of Colin Rowe at Cornell and then formalised into his work on ‘recombinant urbanism’,\textsuperscript{10} is critical to an understanding of this fragmented London. Shane argues that the recombinant fragmentary city developed from a series of private initiatives by landowners and large aristocratic estates from the 17th century on as a series of discrete enclaves starting with the Earl of Bedford’s development of Covent Garden. These enclaves, Shane argues, represent self-organising algorithms with similar rules but constant variations. To complement this dynamic model of growth vectors, or armatures, in the form of avenues and roads then connected the individual points avoiding, or cutting off, the unhealthy and unprofitable badlands of the river banks and other typographic episodes where the poor lived in disease ridden rookeries. Shane’s paradigm encompasses industrialisation, the advent of the railways, social housing after the war, the development of the greenbelt and contemporary enclaves such as Canary Wharf or the Kings Cross development. \textit{Recombinant Urbanism} is in essence a formal analysis of city growth which provides a comprehensive narrative of the fragmentary development of London. The players within this narrative are governmental agencies, developers and their architects and it is essentially a top down analysis. It does not account for redundant and transitional conditions nor the social, lifestyle and informal practices which I would argue are likely to become the determinants of future city growth.

Shane’s jigsaw-like reading of London as a field of fragments and vectors that connect them has influenced many of Boyarsky Murphy’s urban projects, in particular the Scatter Plans. This fragmented vision allows for participation through action which is an essential element of play. If a fragment is dislodged or moved the field then reconfigures, if a new, larger fragment crashes in a paradigm shift occurs and the field changes fundamentally, much in the way that a twist in the plot or the introduction of a new character, prop or circumstance moves childrens’ play to a different level.

1) MEASURING EMPTINESS

Measuring Emptiness originated from teaching projects when I was a visiting professor at Bergen Architecture School in Norway from 2003 to 2005. Like many of the Scandinavian nations Norway has suffered from depopulation since the latter part of the twentieth century. There has been a major shift from countryside to city with the result that vast areas of former agricultural land now lie fallow and overgrown. For coastal ports and cities the collapse of the cod and herring fishing industries resulted in the abandonment of processing plants, storage facilities, docks and so on which led to widespread unemployment and depopulation of the central areas. There are many parallels with American rustbelt cities and the ‘white flight’ from city centres of the 1950s and 1960s. But what was interesting about the Norwegian condition was that this abandonment and decline went hand in hand with the new burgeoning economy of North Sea gas and oil extraction and this dichotomy was confusing to my students.

The two projects that I will now describe were concerned first with the play-like re-enactment of previous lifestyles and patterns of behaviour and then with proposals to re-animate and connect these traces.


fig. 15. Rummu, Estonia. Detail of Soviet forced labour camp perimeter. The camp provided labour for the quarry.
Meland - re-enactment...

My studio at Bergen Architecture Studio was commissioned by the Norwegian Agricultural Ministry to study an abandoned agricultural community on the island of Meland in Nordhordland. The community had been a fully functioning village with an economy based on fishing and agriculture. At the time of the study there was no fishing and the only farming was the cash crop of Christmas trees. What we did find, however, were the ruins and traces of a once thriving community which must have been capable of surviving in isolation for long periods over the winter months. Each farmstead comprised a collection of buildings and structures for storing and processing produce and also for fishing. There were communal buildings such as a mill, a sawmill and a barn with a still for producing alcohol from apples. There was a small chapel and also a community hall. These ruins were witness to a communal network of some sophistication.

After mapping and uncovering the physical, social and economic complexities of the small community the studio set out to re-animate selected elements of the village and to propose new connections between the existing parts. This took the form of individual projects, where students focussed on a particular site, and on group projects such as the creation of an outdoor cinema within the ruins of the community centre. In responding to this completely abandoned community the students operated at three different levels. Firstly they uncovered and mapped traces of pre-existing social and economic networks. This mapping was a creative process which involved working directly with the site in which they sought to re-enact previous activities and working practices. Secondly they overlaid new networks onto the site by proposing new connections, material interventions and activities that could both re-animate elements of the existing fabric and propose new forms of activity and inhabitation. Thirdly, by the creating a series of new events to which local inhabitants were invited, they presented a new understanding of the site and its future potentials to a wider audience.

This studio was important for me, it was immersive and much time was spent on the site where the final projects were all constructed. The abandoned community was empty of activities and people and several decades of disuse had brought significant decay and ruin, however the traces of everything were still in place. The spirit and complexity of the community had not disappeared, it had become latent, lying dormant until circumstances changed and the students’ re-enactment of what they had uncovered suggested ways and means to re-animate these ruins.

Teaching has been one of my longstanding methods of practice. I have taught design studios in schools of architecture in the UK, throughout Europe and North America, as well as in Asia. This has offered me the opportunity to set an agenda that is speculative and within the framework of the interests and concerns of my practice. Students, who are typically in their final year of study, participate as assistants and, even though they can produce extraordinary outcomes, this happens because they are operating within the framework of my practice. The varied responses of a group of students to a speculative project such as Measuring Emptiness has provided rich content for me to analyse and incorporate into my own research. These activities progress in parallel to the work of BMA and the crossover between these two fields of practice has proven to be extremely fertile.

I will be evidencing the outcomes of this aspect of my research in relation to Urban Tactics with reference to the outcomes of five different studios that I led, two of which were at BAS in Norway, two at the Bartlett in London, and one at Carleton University.
Haugesund - Measuring Emptiness

The following year my studio was commissioned by the city of Haugesund, on the 125th anniversary of the city, to make proposals for its centre. Haugesund is a coastal city on the west coast of Norway which had previously been a major fishing port. The fishing industry had all but disappeared with the result that large areas of the city centre and the port areas were essentially abandoned. Vintage photographs and postcards showed the fishing port packed with trawlers and other vessels to the extent that it must have been almost possible to cross the main port inlet by hopping from boat to boat, these waters were now empty except for a few leisure boats. Because the fishing industry had virtually disappeared the economy of Haugesund was now reliant on North Sea oil and in particular on the construction and assembly of oil rigs. The rigs were constructed in an enormous hanger, at least 75 metres tall, on the outskirts of the port area and then floated out into the North Sea. The platforms and rigs are autonomous structures which are assembled from hundreds of thousands of individual steel components, all of which are categorised by type and painted in different colours. The brightly coloured steel components are then laid out flat on concrete plinths outside of the construction hangar (fig. 17) prior to being brought in for assembly.

Haugesund had been largely formed by the fishing industry from its networks of skills, trades and the production of materials to the many associated building types ranging from fisherman’s housing to storage and processing plants, all of which had clearly been integral to the city and its centre but were now abandoned. The oil rig construction industry, in contrast, was removed from the centre and largely internalised within a huge and highly visible hanger on the outskirts of the city surrounded by vast fields of concrete for the delivery and sorting of steelwork that was produced in Eastern European steelworks. Itinerant assembly workers were housed in temporary dormitories within the complex.

The spatial and social consequences of this shift in economic production that Haugesund was now faced with were profound and the obvious temptation for a school of architecture would be to rush in with a series of building proposals to fill the empty gaps and regenerate the city. However it soon became obvious that there was no need for new buildings because, as the population had declined, there were in fact large numbers of empty buildings of every type including housing, shops and office buildings which could surely be refurbished and re-used.

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fig. 16. Haugesund - Measuring Emptiness. North Sea Rim. The project was initiated under the broader framework of linking similar conditions around the North Sea rim.

fig. 17. Oil rig steel components on loading bay.

fig. 18. Student installation on empty dockside loading bay.
fig. 20. Detail of installation in abandoned fish packing facility using found slabs of rigid insulation board.
fig. 21. Detail from exhibition.
fig. 22. Cutting and rearranging abandoned timber fisherman’s houses. Maquette from video.
The idea of ‘Measuring Emptiness’ developed from understanding this apparently existential crisis to the city and, coincidentally to the architectural school. The starting point was to see emptiness and abandonment as an opportunity rather than a blight and this led to identifying, mapping and quantifying the different forms of emptiness in the city. If something so pervasive and negative could be broken down into specific conditions and locations, this could then be communicated to the local communities who could then begin to look at their immediate environment in a more positive way. The students were asked to identify sites of emptiness, to categorise them and then to animate them by adding, subtracting or altering. They adopted different tactics to measure emptiness such as building a structure out of blocks of insulation within abandoned warehouses that ‘filled’ the space; (figs. 19-20) cutting a line across a stretch of the city comprising buildings, homes and empty lots and filming it to uncover the extent of disused space; (fig. 22) assembling and recombining found elements from disused buildings onto nearby empty plots; (fig. 18) making constructions from rope that expanded and contracted according to the amount of moisture in the air, (fig. 21) and constructing a mobile cinema for the viewing of abandoned sites.

The actions that the students made were recorded and developed into installation pieces that were exhibited in the Town Hall and in the city. Whilst not exactly what the mayor had envisaged, the exhibition was very successful in changing public perception of the city. In retrospect and in the context of this research, the work marked an important shift in my understanding of urban fabric and in particular how much empty or under-used space existed, how different it was, and how it might be repurposed and used in ways that were not necessarily commercially or developer driven.

The Measuring Emptiness project was of a greater scale than Meland and the conditions were different: abandonment co-existed cheek by jowl with active parts of the city in Haugesund. However the most important development was the degree of interaction with a large public audience who were genuinely interested and intrigued by the projects that students developed over the course of the semester. It was as if the students had, through their direct and material responses to the materiality of emptiness and abandonment, given voice to questions that had long been unasked. I realise now that it was the playfulness of their projects and the simple actions involved in making their installations that suggested new ways of looking at an old problem and triggering new uses.
In our project for Philadelphia we were faced with a similar set of problems that my students had researched in Haugesund yet on a much bigger scale. But whereas the abandonment and ‘emptiness’ that Haugesund faced was largely due to economic factors, Philadelphia’s condition was rooted in social, political and racial issues that were a consequence of the white flight to the suburbs of the 1960s when blue and white collar workers had abandoned their tight knit inner city neighbourhoods. These areas were subject to decades of decay, neglect and destruction as poor African American communities established themselves in the resulting ruins. The project resonates with aspects of my ‘City Rat’ origins in both Chicago and London. It also resonates with the Norwegian projects because the lead designer in our team, Joakim Skajaa, had been my student in Bergen.

Fig. 25. Axonometric view of wider site. The orange elements are proposed interventions to existing structures. The green represents new landscape connections that traverse the site towards the Delaware River which is to the bottom of the image.
The proposal deploys a number of ‘play’ tactics that operate at different scales: from the identification of sites that could be instrumental, to the development of a kit of parts for the activation of these sites, to proposals to connect neighbourhoods to each other and the city beyond by informal circulation routes and structures to facilitate this. We did not approach the site from a conventional architectural position that areas of abandonment should be bulldozed and replaced with something new. Whilst we wanted to work with the history and memories of the site we did not judge it appropriate to infill and reinstate. Our focus was to work with the found site in order to discover clues within its fabric that could begin to change perceptions of the ‘emptiness’ which could then be further developed into opportunities for local communities to take ownership and transform their environment by installing elements from a kit of parts that would allow for a number of different activities. These local initiatives were termed ‘soft infrastructures’ and they would take place within a broader narrative of ‘urban migrations’.

The proposal also built on discoveries made about the nomadic occupation of Istanbul at an Urban Flashes workshop which were applied, or even collaged, into the context of Philadelphia.

We started the project with a detailed analysis of the wider area to establish the extent of the problem. These neighbourhoods had comprised well built and proud blue collar 19th century housing stock for the communities that had worked in what was known as the ‘Workshop of the World’. Blocks of brick row houses had lost all sense of coherence as fires and demolition reduced them to small outcrops of two or three houses surrounded by wasteland. Furthermore the highway systems which had facilitated the exodus from the centre were now cutting off communities without access to cars from the rest of the city. This is a generic urban condition in the United States that I have witnessed first hand in cities such as St Louis, Chicago, Newark, Syracuse, Harlem and the Bronx in New York, and many of the rustbelt towns of the North East. In September 2014 I was in St Louis during a time of great tension following the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson and I was struck by the correlation between the semi derelict fabric of these inner city areas and a very strong sense of dispossession and alienation that is clearly spatial. Driving through North St Louis, the isolated fragments of buildings change one’s perception of scale by framing vistas onto huge expanses of derelict space that extend across many blocks.
Our approach in Philadelphia called for a shift in perception (I am quoting here from my text for the original project):

Our main interest is in helping to develop a shift of perception about the city which will give value to the existing situation and not to the early modernist tabula rasa approach. A shift that acknowledges the existing qualities and infrastructures (such as park systems) of the city as a whole and that is responsive to the individual. A shift that, for example, liberates citizens from their dependence on the car and encourages a rediscovery of the city through walking. How to change the current mindset? We must start with perception of space.

We identified exposed party and flank walls as sites to animate:

Our proposal for Philadelphia began with a new perception of the possibilities of vacancy. City blocks with high degrees of vacancy are like a toothless mouth, gaps predominate and attention is drawn to the exposed party walls that frame these gaps. Blanks, showing traces of previous occupation and the constructional history of the row house types, these walls frame views across further blocks giving an unsettling but exciting new spatial awareness of the city. The immediate instinct, like any good dentist, is to plug these gaps, to infill the empty lots with new structures of a similar scale and somehow to restore the familiar single point perspective streetscape. But the possibilities framed by the party walls are too strong. New movement, both visual and physical, across and diagonal to the block structure has been opened up. A new intimacy is suggested and a new transparency with endless possibilities for inhabitation and use. Following from our observations about the party walls we began to look at other potential sites for exploration as tools to reappraise the vacancy. Roofs, undercrofts of elevated highways and railroads, elevations of larger scale buildings such as abandoned factories all suggest possibilities.

This first phase proposed the identification of all exposed party and flank walls in a given area. These could then be marked, painted or cleaned. Certain strategic walls would then be identified for further attention as entry points and markers to create new routes across the site. After establishing these sites we developed a new building typology based on a simple kit of parts that could be deployed by local residents:

fig 28. Exploded axonometric showing process whereby two blocks are joined. Available exposed party walls are identified and structures are added to them.
The second phase involves the introduction of a new building typology – a typology which is simple, adjustable and one that can be erected and maintained easily with a high degree of involvement from neighbours and local inhabitants. This kit of parts begins with mesh screens on steel framing that can be fixed to existing party walls. Mesh offers many possibilities – it is semi-transparent so that both the mesh and the walls behind are visible; it can protect existing buildings and in some cases existing buildings can be completely wrapped to preserve them as monuments; it is a flexible woven material of varying strengths that can be bent, cut and folded; it is ideal for planting and over time many of the screens will become walls of vegetation; lighting elements can be placed behind the screens to illuminate the neighbourhoods at night.

From the basic screen many options are possible. The mesh can be folded to provide seating areas and also shelter, kiosks can be formed to encourage the local economy, play areas and frames can be incorporated, information boards can be added, projection screens and speaker systems can be fitted to encourage outdoor movies and music events. The ground can be boarded over to provide for impromptu stages and boardwalks, barbeque pits and drinking fountains can be formed. It is envisioned that this process of adaptation and growth is lead by the local communities who can make their own decisions about how to develop their screens and lots. The kit of parts can be provided at city depots and delivery and expert assembly help can be given where needed as part of a city regeneration scheme.

The proposal was choreographed over time:

Over time, and we see this as a five year process, more elaborate and sophisticated structures can be made. Viewing towers for example could be added to the basic screen system. Stairs can be incorporated behind the screens to provide access to rooftops. Screens can enfold roofs to enable more activities. Bridges can connect roofs. The screens can begin to connect existing buildings which can then take on new uses such as senior citizen centres, child care, or learning/media centres. Ultimately new housing developments and work units can be added if appropriate.

fig 29. Catalogue of different additions based on kit of parts.
A larger urban tactic evolved through the project which we called ‘urban migrations’ where the aim was to encourage and facilitate different flows of movement across the city that were not car based and which would help to activate the areas of abandonment. This was inspired by research work carried out during an Urban Flashes workshop in Istanbul where I had discovered that on weekends recent Anatolian and Kurdish immigrants to the city travel from their ghettos across expensive neighbourhoods to set up temporary campsites on the Asian shore of the Bosphorus. Families swim, barbeque and set up tents for the weekend on large concrete decks that are pretty much empty on weekdays, before heading home for the week’s work. In a period when Istanbul has undergone rapid and extensive development resulting in the wholesale demolition of squatter neighbourhoods (known as gecekondus) which are being replaced with largely gated communities, this use of the shorelines instances the development of public space that is temporary, flexible and multi-programmed. Ownership of this public space is by the citizens who take part in it and I would argue that this informal occupation can be seen as nomadic resistance to the sedentary city.  

Urban migrations – informal movement
At a city-wide scale, we would propose larger screens to form new connections across the city and to encourage walking, cycling and jogging across the new network of neighbourhoods. These elements can respond to the scale of the highway, railway, deserted car lot or abandoned warehouse. For example, a giant mesh arbour can be suspended from the undercroft of an elevated highway which can be planted and lit. In the case of a disused office building or warehouse mesh can be built alongside which can be planted and incorporate water recycling; exterior stairs can provide access to the roof which could, for example, be used for allotments and support wind turbines. Vacant and contaminated industrial land along the riverfront can become a destination point as large screens form boardwalks and raised planted areas as well as floating pontoons and open air swimming pools.

11. Refer to Section 4 - Nomadic Detail for a discussion on the nomadic and the sedentary.
Movement across the city is informal. Routes can develop in response to screens and other elements of interest. The city can respond to these developments and provide for cycle routes, jogging tracks and pathways. Routes can take many forms: routes can guide visitors from one building or structure of local or historical interest to another; they can lead from one landscape element to another; they can be local short cuts or city wide connectors. In this spirit residents from small groups of blocks can negotiate road closures whereby the road surface can be reclaimed and landscaped.

We carried out a study of a smaller area comprising two blocks to test out how communication across the neighbourhood could be reinforced and how specific sites could be defined within this new system (fig 31). Here we proposed removing some of the streets to consolidate areas and this selective peeling back, or décollage, of the grid system references work of Hilberseimer as described above. It also provided a clue as to how to provide a sense of public ownership to these proposed new configurations of public and private space:

The opening up of large areas of the city to new forms of movement and public structures will require careful definition of space to provide security, a sense of privacy and local identity to neighbourhoods while encouraging larger ‘urban migrations’ and a sense of public ownership. This can be achieved through landscaping at different scales.

We therefore propose clear zoning delineation which can accommodate public, semi private and private areas. New private gardens can be created for existing houses which can be used for allotments, gardening and enjoyment of the open air. These gardens can be defined by ‘T’ shaped hedges and prickly bushes to form garden windows onto more public areas. This strategy not only deters intruders but is also vandal and graffiti proof. Precedents for public areas can be found in the squares and communal gardens of Georgian and Victorian London and from Radburn in New Jersey. Here screen structures support a wide range of public activities, while public facilities such as open air theatres, play areas, and meeting places can be planned within the landscape. Public areas can be planted with orchards or ornamental trees, wilder forest like areas and meadows can develop. Buried rivers can be exposed.
Phased transformation and amalgamation of city blocks over five years. fig 33. Exposed walls identified. fig 34. Site clearance and walls prepared. fig 35. Initial landscaping and closing of street. figs 36-38. Route across established, landscaping and allotment gardens, kit of part structures.
Conclusion - the Measures of Emptiness

Urban Voids was a key project in the evolution of my urban research because it became a vehicle to test out various strands of thought in response to a problem that was political, social, and spatial. These strands originate in spatial tactics that I have drawn on from the ‘city … Chicago’ (décollage and working with voids), ‘the city … London’ (fragments and vectors), my experiences of Asian cities and the work of my students from Norway. It taught me the importance of concentrating on the physical and material conditions of a site as the basis for the urban play of re-enactment and re-animation. By way of conclusion I list below the tactics that were brought to bear on this project:

- a close reading of the actual conditions on the site;
- the identification of clues within the fabric, of elements that can become triggers to activate it (in this case the party walls);
- exaggeration of the existing condition (in this case décollage, or peeling back, which took the form of selective demolition) to encourage new readings of site;
- a shift in spatial perception (for example how buildings and structures begin to frame new vistas and connections);
- the development of a kit of parts (to enable a multitude of small interventions);
- community participation;
- the use of different timescales from shorter, temporary appropriations and adjustments to structures that might have a life span of a few years to longer term block consolidations and landscaping.
- an urban and political notion of migration, drift or nomadism (opening up territory to citizens to create new networks by walking, cycling, gardening etc).

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fig.39. Urban drift across Philadelphia.
Three London Projects

I will discuss briefly three projects for London which explored how the tactic Measuring Emptiness could be applied in London and in particular how the identification and then transformation of empty and disused sites has evolved as a distinct design tool.

A New Productive Landscape, 2010, was a winning entry for the RIBA competition ‘Forgotten Spaces’ which invited architects to identify and make proposals for spaces that were misused, overlooked or ignored in London. The site that we identified was in the London Borough of Camden near to our studio and it comprised a band of land of the former elevated railway line that connected Kentish Town Road to Camley Street in Kings Cross. The disused railway line runs alongside the working London Overground Railway line and is connected by bridges that have collapsed over time with the result that there are no base to them other than the steel trusses. The site is a fragment of redundant elevated land, it is inaccessible to the public, it is not visible from street level and therefore the vast majority of people have no idea of its existence. The bridges, such as the one that crosses busy Camden Road, (fig. 40) are the only clues to its existence yet because of the congested traffic and street signage it is difficult to identify and understand its function within the urban streetscape.

Having identified this elevated strip of land, we wanted to find ways to connect it, first to the local neighbourhood, and then to suggest how it could become a new network, or link, across the city. We did not want to make it a park, we wanted to activate it with a specific programme, to give it a singular purpose that might then generate further activities. In order to achieve this we researched into different programmes and activities that might reach out to the local communities whose involvement would encourage the site to be used as part of the daily life of the city. Eventually we considered using the site as an allotment garden having discovered that there is a chronic shortage in Camden.  

fig 40. Photomontage of bridge within a bridge.  
fig 41. Hand and balsa wood model showing concept for new bridges.  

12. There are only 4 allotment sites with 195 individual allotment plots in Camden and there are currently over 960 people on the waiting list, the waiting time is estimated to be over 40 years for those who have recently joined the list.
However the standard size for allotment plots in London is either 125m² or 250m² and we realised that these would be too big for the site, privileging only a few people. We designed micro-allotments of 25m² which was the minimum size to produce sufficient amounts of food and our initial proposal provided 150 plots.

The site offered further opportunities and I was fascinated by the dismantled and abandoned bridges and whether these should be reinstated or if a new role might be found for them. Instead of repairing and reinstating these bridges we wanted to introduce new elements that would reflect the change of use from rail bridge to the new opportunities that the productive landscape would bring. I have written elsewhere about mimicry; here I realised that we were looking for something that had the same qualities as a bridge: in other words another bridge, so we proposed a series of bridges within bridges. Whilst the original bridges were designed for trains we conceived the bridges-within-bridges as inhabited bridges, with promenades, platforms, seating and picnic areas, and a small farmers’ market. The bridges are inclined so that visitors can rise up through the rail bridge and see over.

fig.42. Proposed plan showing micro-allotments. fig. 43. Existing site. figs 43-45. Model shots.

13. Refer to Section 1. State of Play.
The new bridges are measuring the emptiness of the original rail bridge, scaled to fit (just) within. As such there are references to some of the Haugesund installations that my students made. However it was the rescaling and the simulation that felt like a great discovery. There are precedents for artists and architects to insert a large new volume into an existing space (I’m thinking now particularly of Anish Kapoor and an installation such as his Marsyas piece for the Tate’s Turbine Hall of 2002). Rescaling, as I have written elsewhere, is a ludic tactic and it gains a critical edge if it is not an exact, Russian doll-like replica. Imagine the surreal possibilities of building a highway on top of a highway that is not for cars, or a prison within a prison which is not for incarceration...heterotopias within infrastructure or even heterotopias within heterotopias? 15

figs. 46-47. Model studies for bridges within bridges.
fig. 48. Concept model for bridges.

14. Refer to the section below Ludic Cities.
15. For a discussion of heterotopia refer to the section below on Scatter Plans - Westry.
Forgotten Spaces - Islington, 2011

Following the publicity surrounding our New Productive Landscape proposal for Camden we were approached by planners from the neighbouring Borough of Islington who were interested in our approach. We were commissioned to prepare a survey of Islington with a view to discovering ‘forgotten sites’ that could be used for allotments and new productive landscapes.

Unlike Camden, there were no elevated railway lines that could be adapted in a similar way. The sites that we identified were mostly railway cuttings and embankments that formed large landlocked sites. For these sites we explored ways of constructing terraces that could be gardened. There was great interest from Islington but ultimately local government cuts following the 2008 financial crash meant that they could not resource the project.

figs 49-51. Samples of sites identified for Islington Council.
The New York High Line is such an important addition to New York, however it is a prisoner of its own success and I have on several recent occasions joined a tight packed throng in a queue shuffling along it having to look at people and not the poor squashed planting or the views onto the city. The High Line is highly accessible and it has quickly become generic space, a tourist must-see and a retail opportunity for many businesses and developers. It is a very successful example of top down design practice which somewhat belies the grassroots origins of the park. Had local neighbourhoods retained more say in the process and had some ownership of the layout and gardening, it might have gained sufficient integrity to remain particular and not be consumed. This should not be understood as romantic harping after the possibilities for and potentials of unspoilt sites as ruin porn and territories for urban exploration. Serious Play is neither about top down design nor sentimentality - it is about play itself, the roll of the dice, the critical processes that we invent and then discard. It is also about achieving that certain level of complexity whereby alternative activities and users can interact in a situation that resists consumption and the tendency for space to become, as the anthropologist Marc Augé has written, ‘non-place’. 16

Postscript

The architect and artist Gordon Matta-Clark’s project ‘Jacks’, published in Avalanche in 1971 is an example of one level of intervention. Matta-Clark captioned the project ‘Jacks: The auto demolition debris zone rip off imitation neighbourhood group action cars abandoned raised propped dismantled and removed 24 hr service.’ The piece was sited beneath Brooklyn Bridge where Matta Clark piled up junk cars, often with car jacks, and other found objects that he recorded in a photo piece that suggests a continuing performance whereby the detritus of the city is examined and re-examined by the actions of rearrangement. The title of the work is ludic referring to ‘not only jacking up cars, but the disarray when jacks are thrown in playing the game’. 17 Matta-Clark was clearly aware of the potential of inaccessible site as his project ‘Reality Properties: Fake Estates’ shows, here he purchased fifteen different slivers of property, often landlocked and inaccessible as a speculative project. Matte-Clark died before completing this project but Cabinet Magazine revisited the project in 2005 documenting the sites and publishing a catalogue called ‘Odd Lots’ 18 which reveals, to my mind, that Matta Clark was carrying out what might be called conceptul land banking. 19 In other words, whilst speculating on the spatial potentials of extraordinary slivers of land, Matta Clark was also engaging critically in the way that developers aggregate parcels of land for sale or future development in a process that typically takes several years to come to fruition.

17. Mary- Anne Jacob in Gordon Matta-Clark: A Retrospective, Chicago 1985, p.35.
19. I will explore this idea further in the next section.
Kevin Adams - Conceptual Land Banker

We were approached out of the blue by Kevin Adams in 2007 with a proposal to work on a project to refurbish the Queen’s Tower on Imperial College’s campus. Kevin, who must have found us through publicity surrounding our Christ Church Tower project, was convinced that there was sufficient redundant space in the tower to create a suite of apartments. It transpired that the project was largely a fiction of Kevin’s imagination and that he had not actually made contact with Imperial College. Nevertheless we formed a relationship with Kevin that led to further projects. Kevin had a strange history, or series of histories, which we never fully uncovered. He resembled John Cleese of Monty Python fame in his appearance, mannerisms and background and he always reminded me of an obsessive character from a Paul Auster novel. At some point in his career he had been the owner of bookshops in Hay on Wye, he had a film company (pornography we suspect) and an interest in development. Kevin’s theory was that the streets of London were paved with slivers of opportunity in the form of small and inaccessible plots of disused land that were owned by the large utility and transport companies such as London Transport, British Gas, the Electricity Board and the various water companies. In his mind this was a conceptual land bank of opportunity and we agreed. The next months were spent carrying out feasibility studies for sites such as the rooftop of a large electricity substation in a prime residential area. We rehearsed logistics, investigated prefabricated systems and designed kits of parts that would facilitate lightweight constructions. Kevin eventually found a larger, more substantial site: the roof of Bayswater Tube Station and we met with London Transport’s property surveyor, Hannah, who indicated that they might well be interested in a joint venture to develop the site. It was a challenging prospect, the roof had not been designed to carry much load and there could not be any interruptions to the running of the Circle and District lines during construction. Structure was the key and our structural engineers advised us that it would be possible to construct a maximum of nine houses on the roof complex with foundations that would spread the load from the roof onto nearby slivers of land where footings could be formed. The project was to be financed by Kevin’s friend Angus, a school friend and hedge fund manager. We met with Kevin and Angus at the Landsdowne Club just off Berkeley Square. The Landsdowne is the informal headquarters of London’s hedge fund managers and, by pure coincidence, our meeting with Angus was on the day in September 2008 when Lehman Brother’s Bank crashed and it seemed likely that AIG might follow suit. The air in the Landsdowne was electric and there were sporadic shouts and even screams as very agitated hedge fund managers bellowed into their Blackberries and ran out of the club room. Angus, who I now realised must have foreseen this outcome and taken positions on it, was serene and smiled throughout. We had funding in place but unfortunately Hannah’s boss at London Transport stopped the project dead - whereby hangs another tale.

Kevin disappeared for a few years but recently surfaced to discuss some air rights properties… I have tried to relay the fictive aspects of real life dealings with clients (there are at least three similar clients we have had similar relationships with and about whom I can tell equally strange stories) because from the experience of our practice, life would appear to be stranger than fiction. This may appear to be a digression but our clients’ projects often have this air of improbability because they are speculative, they encompass much that is private and personal and therefore fantasy and reality become hard to distinguish. I would argue that this is a condition of Serious Play because the development of a project is essentially a protean state of play where desire, ego, role playing and speculation float in cloud of uncertainty. Within this shifting field our role as architects is to give shape, form and direction to possible scenarios that can then be externalised as objective propositions.
There is something filmic about many of the experiences that we have had with the more speculative projects that I have described above. Conversely we have also worked for film directors, producer’s and a theatre impresario on private residential projects where the experience has been the opposite and the architectural project has developed almost purely in terms of precise, often obsessive detail. We recently completed a project for Ken Loach who had bought a 19th century worker’s flat near King’s Cross and he wanted to refurbish it in a way that would be authentic. The flat was tiny, with one bedroom, and accessed by an external walkway. Whilst Ken’s goal was the authentic, and much time was taken with the reinstatement and recreation of original detail, there was an implicit conflict between his own lifestyle and features from this that he wanted to bring into the flat and the project assumed the form of a detailed debate between these two positions.

I will conclude ‘Measuring Emptiness’ with another filmic reference. I have written about the Italian group Stalker elsewhere, the group’s project is essentially to walk and thereby to reveal the territories of urban voids, social inequality and the dispossessed. Their practice becomes propositional, or results in physical constructions on occasion, but the conceptual strength of their work lies in exposing and revealing the unknown voids and territories of the contemporary urban landscape. In October 2015 I was involved in a collaborative project with Stalker, students of architecture from Stockholm, Helsinki and Tallinn together with my own students from the UK, to walk across Estonia from Tallinn to Jagala. The walk took two days and about seventy people took part. We traced scenes from Tarkovsky’s ‘Stalker’ starting from the entrance to the ‘Zone’, which is in central Tallinn, and ending at Jagala waterfall and the abandoned hydro-electric plant where much of the film was shot. The walk was ludic and involved many diversions, much trespassing, seemingly insurmountable obstacles and dead ends. We walked a fifty kilometre section through the ruins and remains of the Soviet occupation, encountering abandoned labour camps, endless crumbling slab blocks, dead infrastructures, a whorehouse for Russian truckers (where we stayed), the scars of the abandoned phosphate mining industry and the remaining traces of aborted collective farming. Walking with such a large group across these voids formed a collective measuring of this emptiness that, because of our real time experience of the physical conditions and the vivid scars from the Soviet era, resonated across time and space. It also resonated with the spatial experiences that the hundreds of thousands of refugees from Syria had been undergoing in the previous months.
‘Measuring Emptiness’ has evolved primarily as a response to the decayed fabric and abandoned infrastructures of the post-industrial cities of Europe and North America and, through a number of projects, workshops and design studios, I have developed tactics to identify, map out and understand what has been left behind. To some extent the work aestheticises the found condition but, unlike ‘ruin porn’ and the work of many contemporary art photographers where the work rests within the visual frame of the photograph (imagery of Detroit is a prime example), this has become a conscious tactic to draw attention to decay and abandonment so that its presence can become part of an architectural process that seeks to discover new potentials to re-activate the city. I have referred above to the influence of Gordon Matta-Clark; Robert Smithson, in particular his writings on entropy and the text ‘A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey’, has also formed a key part of this community of practice. Our Urban Voids project for Philadelphia embodies this approach as it seeks to identify, and then activate, exposed party walls as part of a wider re-animation of the site. The duration of the Urban Void constructions is not intended to be permanent, it can be seasonal or it can extend over a number of years as and when local social and entrepreneurial networks take control over them. In such circumstances timing and the choreography of events determine duration and become the measure of a provisional architecture. ‘Active Landscapes’ seeks to build on the premise of ‘Measuring Emptiness’ by exploring how ephemeral and provisional architectures can activate the ‘empty’ urban spaces that I have described above.

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Fournier Street, London and Kartal, Istanbul

Two projects by former students exemplify this approach and have been instrumental in the development of the concept Active Landscapes. The Fournier Street project was one student’s response to a design studio set in the Brick Lane area of London in 1999. This studio was part of the Directed Studies Abroad programme that I ran for Carleton University, Canada, for two years in 1999 and 2000. Carleton had a very small budget for this programme and they could not afford rent for premises. The school was therefore itinerant and we relied on the generosity of several London schools of architecture to provide meetings rooms over the weekends. Otherwise we met to discuss work in the streets where students had been working. Not being bound to an institution or to the confines of a school of architecture was surprisingly liberating and the studio as a whole became very sensitive to their sites and the way in which they were changing, sometimes almost on a daily basis. One group of students, for example, came close to an Islamic Bengali gang and was able to witness the complexities of the demarcation of gang territories and how and where weapons, mostly knives, were stashed in close proximity to these immaterial but highly charged boundaries. Another project examined how changing demographics of this historical immigrant area had impacted on a religious building that was originally built as a chapel for Huguenots in the 18th century, but then became a Wesleyan chapel, and then Methodist before being transformed into first Spitalfields Great Synagogue and then, since 1976, to the London Jamme Mashid, or Great Mosque.

Andrea Esplin’s Fournier Street project focussed on a terrace of 18th century buildings that were built by Huguenot silk weavers both as homes and as places of work with large north facing glazed lofts which they used for weaving workshops. The street has now been gentrified and each building is a single residence, however during the late 19th century the area was heavily settled by Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. The pattern of density changed dramatically as the area became a crowded ghetto to the extent that single rooms became homes to extended families of up to ten people. The project was based on research into censuses and original documentation about individual buildings and through this Andrea was able to map out spatial patterns of occupation and movement both at a neighbourhood level and within the individual home. In order to understand how so many people could co-exist within a single room speculative drawings were made to identify all the family members over a twenty four hour period. We learnt how carefully and precisely circulation within the room, within the building (there was typically only one WC per building), the workspace and within the confines of the neighbourhood with its religious, communal and shopping facilities must have been regulated by a consensual spatial logic. Evidence of this user’s logic of density can also be seen in documentation of the Kowloon Walled City in Hong Kong which was demolished between 1993 and 1994.

fig. 58. Spatial mapping of inhabitation of a single room in a house on Fournier Street, London. Andrea Esplin.
Whilst the changing patterns of density in Brick Lane were extremely interesting to discover, it was a revelation that these houses had neither memories nor the capacity to retain traces of everything that had happened within them. I conclude from this now that it might be one of an architect’s unspoken roles to uncover these spatial histories in order to speculate on and design for the future. Revisiting this mapping and subsequent choreographies has revealed a link to Chicago and the Chicago School of Urban Ethnography of the 1920s where the practice of ‘participant observation’ was developed and which, as Thomas McDonough has shown, emerged as a strong influence on the Situationists and their tactic, the dérive. 

Ming Deng’s project for the Kartal district in Eastern Istanbul was produced within the context of the Bartlett’s Masters of Urban Design course some twelve years later. We were studying the city of Istanbul at a time of rapid growth and change as a state lead construction boom was radically changing patterns of land ownership and the nature of public space throughout the city. At the time around fifty percent of all housing and buildings in Istanbul were informal settlements which means that they were, to varying degrees, squatted and illegal structures. The origins of these idiosyncratic patterns of landownership go back to the Ottoman period and it has been estimated that up six million people live in gecekondu, houses that are literally built overnight to exploit a legal loophole which means that the authorities have to recognise their legal existence. The government had implemented a policy of forcibly evicting residents of gecekondus in order to demolish them and build gated communities in their place. We were working on the Asian edges of Istanbul and this process was evident, resulting in huge developments of eight to fourteen story residential towers of almost identical appearance. The site in Kartal comprises an abandoned industrial district that had recently been put forward as the location for a new ‘green’ parametric central business district by Zaha Hadid Architects.

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Fig. 59. Recto of Greetings from Istanbul postcard made for PRS 1, 2013.

22. McDonough, Thomas, The Dérive and Situationist Paris in Andreotti & Costa - Situationists. Art, Politics, Urbanism. Barcelona, 1996. McDonough also draws attention to the work of French researchers who mapped the movements of a young woman over one year in the 1950s whose ‘itineraries almost exclusively define a triangle whose points are her residence, that of her piano teacher, and the School of Political Science’. Debord describes this map as an example of “a modern poetry capable of provoking sharp emotional reactions (in this case indignation at the fact that there are people who live like that).”, p. 58.
Ming’s project proposes an Urban Carnival for the site as a way of celebrating the transitional nature of Kartal. The proposal comprises a series of temporary structures that will be deployed across the pre-construction site. The design of the carnival is based on a thorough study of the ephemeral structures, events and rituals culled from the traditional urban spaces of Istanbul through exquisite drawings which are then developed and assembled at different scales. Narratives unfold from collective memories and qualities of the city to interact with the site and surrounding neighbourhoods to create ‘a nomadic presence of the desires and dreams in the real city, deconstructing and recombining the local memories with the new interpretations in an unusual and provisional way, exploring the networks of city life, providing an alternative vision on the reality of the gentrification and modernization towards the city. It is an instant urban form which is keeping (sic) constantly changing and fleeting, provide dynamics of connection between the dream phantasmasgorias and the realities (sic).’ Implicit to Ming’s proposal is the thesis that the informal, the ephemeral and the collective memory of the city can coalesce into the ‘carnivalesque’ to activate an area of abandonment and create a dialogue that challenges common assumptions about the future development of the city. As part of her design process Ming described the eventual dismantling of the carnival which anticipated the traces which could remain and become embedded in the site, to influence (or perhaps resist) the seamless and permanent future of the new central business district.

I framed the research in both projects as one of my methods of practice to use mapping and the observation of everyday activities as the basis to inform narratives and choreographies which can then act as generators for urban interventions at a larger, public scale. Under this framework Andrea reconstructed an imagined past based on the re-enactment of patterns of movement and density while Ming suggested a provocative and poetic transient re-animation of an abandoned site that is in a state of transition.
New Communal Productive Gardens, 2010

I have described above how American city centres have suffered such a degree of abandonment and segregation and how this has been largely due to the White Flight to the suburbs of the 1950s and 60s and the resulting mobility that four car families enjoy at the expense of the inner city ghettos. The Philadelphia project set out to measure and categorise emptiness in the inner city in order to challenge perceptions of space and abandonment so that, with the implementation of a kit of parts to specific sites and the activities that these would generate, these territories would open up to the wider community and establish new networks of communication. The New Communal Productive Gardens project focussed on the American suburb which has evolved as an amorphous sprawl of housing lots and privatised space around malls and convenience stores. In the suburbs homes are endlessly repetitious yet distinct and free-standing on their lawns. Joel Garreau has described how, in the post-war years, the road networks and the ‘edge cities’ and suburbs were strategically placed beyond the nuclear fall-out zones of major cities and this insight helps to make sense of the self-imposed segregation that characterises suburban life in America. The legacy of this paranoic planning and home grown segregation has resulted in an over dependence on the car and a deeply unsustainable lifestyle of consumption.

The New Communal Productive Gardens project (the first of Boyarsky Murphy’s Active Landscape projects that I will be describing) sought to question the self-imposed isolation that these suburbs embody by suggesting a means to animate neighbourhoods, blocks and then individual homes through the shared production of food. The process starts with the development of architectural details and a kit of parts that provides for a menu of alterations, additional elements and extensions to the typical suburban house in order to facilitate the production, storing and processing of vegetables and fruit that are grown by the owners. These architectural devices provide a way for the house to respond to the seasons and to the type and quantity of produce by expanding and contracting according to demand. The project envisages a new suburban landscape which is animated by infinite variation and adjustment as temporary structures are introduced into an otherwise inactive and unproductive environment.

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From very early projects such as the Erasmus Zone I have been interested in repetition and the serial in relation to design and the urban environment and through my researches I have discovered how they form key components of Serious Play. There are critical differences between the two: repetition is the more literal where the generic suburban house is repeated over and again and, whilst each repeated element may be slightly different to its predecessor, it is static and essentially the same because it has not, in the process of repetition, undergone a transformation and therefore it remains true to its origins in the industrial processes of mass production, fabrication and volume house building. Nonetheless this can be a playful process because to repeat something over and over again can result in the suspension or loss of meaning so that it is reduced ad absurdum and the serious thing becomes funny. At this point the existing rules and logic break down in the face of humour and from this confusion fresh interpretations or even a new paradigm can emerge. With the serial we do not see the same element over and over again, we see similar elements in the process of evolving. This is an incremental process and in this instance serial play implies the setting in train of a process whereby a generic element can develop and change through slight alterations that then enter into a dialogue with its predecessors to form a logic that informs the characteristics of its successor. The serial is less playful than repetition because it relies on specific constraints and rules for, unlike the case of repetition, the game cannot change.
Starting with the basic unit, the suburban house, we prepared a Catalogue of Productive Extensions (fig. 65) which listed a number of elements that could be added to the house in order to encourage and facilitate the production of vegetables and fruit and in the process begin to transform the home and its relation to its lawn. Each element was built in model form and the variants were all photographed as illustrations to the catalogue to show how the house would alter.

**Catalogue of Productive Extensions:**
- fruit hanging structure
- shadow greenhouse
- detachable wall
- adjustable awnings
- side/wide porch
- independent porch
- offset wall and crop hanger
- double roof
- double offset wall
- movable porch
- sliding roof
- multi taskings
- barley hanger
- offset wall
- extruding deck
- sliding storage
- flip-up rainwater collector
- darkroom for sprouts etc.
- multi-functional deck

The catalogue can be read as a sales catalogue, as a specification or as a listing of props for a theatrical performance. It describes a mechanical world where things are adjusted, detached, rotated and pivoted in response to the seasons.

*fig. 66. Productive Lawn. Model.*
Productive Lawn
The next scale to consider was the ubiquitous grass lawn (fig.67) and here the project became a logistical exercise in working out how individual lawns could be transformed into productive vegetable gardens that could provide all the annual requirements for a family of four. The architecture was to do with layouts and the design of raised planting boxes.

New Block Economies
The community aspect of the project suggested that neighbours could, through a process of negotiation, remove their picket fences and form communal gardens at the heart of each block. These gardens would then become a shared resource for orchards and vegetable plots and also for leisure activities and the sorting and storage of produce. This would become the basis for wider neighbourhood networks whereby different blocks would cultivate different produce and a local economy of trading would develop over the seasons. Block A may, for example produce peaches and cherries in the summer which it may trade with Block B for apples and pears in the fall. (fig.64)

There are several aspects of Serious Play that emerged from this project that should be noted:

The proposal is for a ‘bottom up’ approach that provides simple and accessible architectural tools to enable a re-shaping of the everyday environment. In other words, anyone can play.

The new logic of vegetable production drives the deployment of these tools and empowers residents to extend and change their homes. The normative environment now becomes a world of invention and variation.

The consequences of these constructional changes and the self sufficiency that food production brings will reduce dependency on the car and the need to travel so much. Play thus has the potential to subvert and reconfigure the hierarchies of life that are embedded within the status quo and the things that we take for granted.

The negotiated dismantling of the picket fence to create communal gardens marks the beginning of a profound shift from an individualist yet passive mindset to a communitarian and active lifestyle. Serious Play entertains hypotheses that have the capacity to transport the player into new roles and new understandings of the world.

Trading of produce where there is no ‘like for like’, as with any social interaction, is based on empathy and role playing between the protagonists. It requires a completely different set of skills to paying for pre-packaged goods in a supermarket. Play encourages mutual understanding between the different characters and their roles in the game.
Interlude

At this point the figure of John Hejduk looms large after a period of nearly thirty years of neglect, particularly his Mask Projects and specifically his project ‘Victims’ (fig. 69), in which I had a personal involvement. I realise now that his work is an influence in the suburban plot project, in particular the fragmented timber constructions which each have their own characteristics and operate autonomously within the field of the former lawn. I spent a large part of the summer of my third year of architecture study at the AA redrawing the plans, sections and elevations of the sixty seven characters that comprise the work “Victims” for exhibition and publication. These were large drawings, probably A0, and they arrived in rolls of dyelines of quite indistinct pencil drawings. My task was to redraw these in ink onto mylar. To redraw someone else’s drawings is, on the one hand, an almost automatic procedure where concerns of technique override any creative thought. My immediate concerns here were to achieve the correct line weights and how to ensure that the flow of ink from my rapidograph pens was steady and that the ink did not blot when lines met because any error on mylar was unforgiving and eraser or razor marks were there to stay, which meant that the whole drawing had to be started all over again. On the other hand, by redrawing I was somehow inhabiting the drawings and the Victim structures themselves for a similar amount of time that Hejduk had spent drawing the original sketches. In his introduction to the publication Hejduk was fully aware of this uncanny possibility when he wrote of the personification of drawings: ‘architectural tracings are apparitions, outlines, figments. They are not diagrams but ghosts.....drawings and tracings are like the hands of the blind, touching the surface of the face in order to understand a sense of volume, depth and penetration.’ 26. In recalling this episode I realise that, similar to the way that children at play can easily adapt themselves to become other characters and persona, the playful architect can take on the role of others in a natural and subconscious way.

Hejduk’s structures mainly represent characters and, at the same time, their place of work, for example the ‘Park Attendant’ and his ‘Gate House’ or the ‘Crochet Lady’ and her ‘Crochet Chair’. Sometimes they are more abstract such as ‘Room for Those Who Looked the Other Way - Room C’. They can be arranged and constructed by the citizens of Berlin over two thirty year periods as a grid of evergreen trees slowly grows. Hejduk’s work is deeply poetic and engaged in what he calls ‘incremental time’. The structures themselves, with their individual narratives, reference the intense political traumas of the 20th century and they are framed within the construct of the masque, the elaborate and highly staged 16th and 17th century courtly entertainments.

I now appreciate that, in the process of inhabiting Hejduk’s drawings, something enduring did rub off on me and this was the discovery that the test of an architectural idea and its success relies ultimately on its generosity. Whether it be masque, plot or play, an architectural concept needs to acknowledge and account for all the players, to allow for sufficient improvisation, and to provide the means for protagonists, proponents and participants to arrange and fit themselves within an unfolding scenario. ‘Active Landscapes’ is therefore a recognition of the importance of inclusivity within an architectural project and at the same time the need for architects to let go as they become increasingly irrelevant to the play that they have set in motion.

There are a number of projects that fit within the category of ‘Active Landscapes’ and these are partially illustrated in the appendices. Specifically they are: a commissioned urban study for Twickenham in London, and projects for Vauxhall, Dallas, Thessaloniki and Aarhus. The Parco Solar scheme (described in Scatter Plans) is also relevant. In the meantime I will conclude with a prize winning project for the 2012 Expo held in Yeosu, South Korea.

**Thematic Pavilion - Amphibious Aquacultural Seascape Unit, 2009**

In the context of ‘Active Landscapes’ and ‘Serious Play’, this project made several contributions:

- it introduced the spatial notion of layering to work both alongside and in opposition to the formal device of the field with free-floating objects that coalesce around points of attraction;

- it engaged in the environmental debate with a radical and utopian proposal;

- it engaged with and sought to disrupt the prevailing architectural predisposition for the ‘iconic building’.

The theme of the Expo was ‘The Living Ocean and Coast’ with the subthemes of ‘Preservation and Sustainable Development of the Ocean and Coast’, ‘New Resources Technology’, and ‘Creative Marine Activities’; and the brief was to design ‘an iconic place of envisioning the Expo’s theme’. At the time of the competition ‘iconic’ meant ‘parametric designed’ which in our view would result in an ‘object building’ that would somehow monumentalise architecture’s abject failure to engage in critical issues beyond the confines of its narrow discipline and self-preoccupations. So we then asked ourselves, would a building actually be the appropriate response to the impending crisis that rising sea levels and flooding posed? And, following this, how could the oceans and their imperilled shorelines become a resource? In other words, what would be an appropriate response?

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fig. 70 - 71. Recto and Verso of Rough Sea from Palace Pier, Brighton made for PRS 1, 2013.
Fig. 72. View of pavilion over floating aquacultural seascape landscape
Shorelines are liminal conditions occupying both land and sea which are energised by the ebb and flow of tides (fig. 70) yet architecture has rarely had a convincing response to this condition. The Victorians built piers and fun palaces out into the water as sites for the consumption of mass leisure and there are architectural precedents of elevated life boat stations with steep ramps for launching emergency vessels at speed. From the other side there are endless marinas and floating harbours for boats and I have written above about the giant North Sea Oil rigs. Yet there seemed to be little precedence for projects that sought to blur the boundaries between land and sea and speculate on a new fluctuating and variable shoreline condition. Kenzo Tange’s Tokyo Bay project of 1960 which proposed an extension to Tokyo in the form of a linear city for a population of five million is an exception and it was an inspirational model for the project. However we realised that the Tokyo Bay was, it could be argued, proposing to colonise the bay by projecting the city into the ocean, and this might just as easily have been the terra firma of a desert. Our dissatisfaction pushed us in the direction of a more indeterminate response. Kiyonori Kikutake, another Metabolist architect, also participated in the Tokyo Bay competition and later worked on a series of projects, ‘Ocean Urbanism’ until 1975. The projects are more lyrical than those of Tange but these were largely ideas for autonomous floating structures and cities that did not straddle the land and the sea.

Alongside these architectural questions we researched into current technologies for harnessing energy from the sea and the cultivation of food and biomass for energy. We discovered that many exciting and innovative research programmes and prototypes were underway. Surely our architectural response should mediate between the rapid advances in technology and the organiser’s aspirations for the iconic? Perhaps the appropriate reaction should be to develop an infrastructural system that might mitigate the dangers of rising seas by both harnessing potential resources and by dissipating the flows of water into floating structures that could adapt to changing conditions.

Our response to these questions was to develop a network for the production of food and biomass for the creation of energy which we called the Amphibious Aquacultural Seascape Unit:

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The Unit sits in the bay, connected to the breakwaters by a network of walkways and floating fields. This network supports a self-sufficient cycle of production of fish, food and biomass for the production of energy. This model is capable of sustaining small communities across the globe and can be deployed in areas prone to flooding. It will provide employment, energy for the pavilion and produce to feed visitors. Structurally the network is partially fixed to the seabed and partially floating.

We have therefore developed the Thematic Pavilion as a prototype and catalyst for future developments. It forms the hub for a new floating network: the Amphibious Aquacultural Seascape Unit. The Pavilion will thus become a pedagogic centre and exemplar for a future ‘blue’ economy and lifestyle. The thematic pavilion will be reached through the AASU. Visitors will have the opportunity to explore the AASU and learn at first hand about the many processes deployed for the production of food and energy. Entry to the pavilion is via a large floating open air public piazza that can serve as a market place, a night market, an event space and a venue for outdoor exhibitions. The pavilion is raised above high tide levels by seven metres. Its form is reminiscent of surrounding mountains and distant islands. This form, raised on stilts, anticipates future displacements that will be caused by rising sea levels. The pavilion is gently reflective, clad with brushed stainless steel panels, to provide a mirage-like iconic image for the Expo. The underbelly of the pavilion, supported by a forest of columns, describes a new amphibious condition whereby man can establish new relationships of interdependency and sustenance with the oceans of the world.

The Thematic Pavilion was a consequence of the process of layering different floating structural grids across the shore line it was elevated by seven metres and conceived as a displaced piece of landscape. By elevating it we made space for a large market area where visitors could buy and sample produce (fig. 76).

Recognition
A review of the competition finalists in the Korean magazine Space revealed that the message had got through and that the polemic of the project had touched a nerve with the organisers and the jury. With this in mind I took the comment that the plan ‘lacks architectural excellence’ as a complement:

‘Considerations for Landmark Architecture. In large scale international events such as the International Exposition, an iconic landmark is always a hot-button issue. Criticism over iconic landmarks, mass produced by large capitals in cities such as Dubai and Shanghai has been freely expressed. With this in mind, and given that Yeosu Expo’s theme is ‘The Living Ocean and Coast’, a consensus is building that new interpretations and suggestions are needed for iconic landmarks. In this regard, it can be said that Nicholas Boyarsky’s plan lacks architectural excellence, but the proposed idea is progressive and makes an important point: building environmentally friendly landscape architecture is a more appropriate scope for this Expo, rather than building a typological object. The panel of judges agreed with this statement and selected this proposal in order for us to reflect on the status and importance of landmarks’ Kim Sang-ho.29
Conclusion - top-down/bottom-up

Kim Sang-ho’s comments reinforce my argument that there is a fundamental difference in architecture between the sedentary, the serious (in Huizinga’s sense), the typological and the iconic, which are all hierarchical and top-down strategies, and the nomadic, the playful, the empirical and open-ended bottom-up tactics. Shinohara has expressed this dynamic through a different lens: the order of the individual house versus the anarchy of the city with its ‘beauty of chaos’ where one is the measure of the other. Whilst the evolution of this binary relationship makes perfect sense in the context of late 20th century Tokyo, and I have found Shinohara’s notions of ‘progressive anarchy’ extremely stimulating, the model is limited and somewhat inflexible precisely because it is framed in such a dialectical, oppositional way. The contribution of Active Landscapes to this debate is to put forward a different model whereby architecture facilitates an infinite number of individual incremental activities across a broad field. It is a mechanical landscape of repetition and serial evolutions and a social landscape of small stories, post cards and local dramas - a landscape of play in which the understanding of authorship shifts away from top-down towards the bottom-up practices of Serious Play.

30. ‘It is a strange city where an apparent disorder and invisible order exist side by side. I concluded that the gaps among the absurd mixture of different spaces were what fuelled the vitality of anarchy.’ Kazuo Shinohara in conversation with Hirosha Hemmi. AD Urban Flashes Asia.
3) Scatter Plans - How things Settle

By way of a conclusion to Active Landscapes I sketched out a scenario for an architectural landscape of serious play which is animated by countless small actions based around themes such as the production of food. A DIY landscape perhaps? But one motivated ultimately by survival and the social and communitarian values needed to achieve this as opposed to individualistic self improvements of the B&Q variety. It is a utopian vision and one expression of this can be seen in the image from our Westry project where we propose the re-organisation of South East England to reflect the most efficient way of organising the harvesting and distribution of locally produced energy. (fig. 154) There are references to the Garden City movement, New Deal planning and some examples of early Soviet planning. The projects that I will describe are largely concerned with the creation of small settlements and communities and they have been designed using scatter plans.

The term Scatter Plans was coined by Grahame Shane in response to BMA’s project for Den Haag. It refers to a technique that I developed in response to a Europan competition brief for a housing settlement on the outskirts of Den Haag in 1996. It is a design tactic that has reappeared in a few projects in the intervening years, most recently in 2013, and this text will explore how this method has developed and changed through these projects. It will argue that chance, the accidental and the random can be a valid design tool and that they are key components of play.

I am not aware of any architectural precedents for the scatter plan, however a community of practice might include the Surrealists’ use of automatism and in particular their automatic writings and the automatic drawings of Andre Masson. The Surrealists sought to free the creative instinct from the rational control of the brain by using automatic techniques such as chance, dreams, found materials and the accidental to appeal directly to the subconscious. For a period in the 1980s the Viennese architects Helmut Swiczinsky and Wolf Prix of Coop Himmelb(l)au used automatic techniques to design buildings. They would create quick pencil sketches together with their eyes closed and the resulting drawing would be subjected to a number of further interpretative procedures such as model making and the cutting of drawn sections, elevations,

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figs. 77 - 78. Recto and Verso of Scatter/ Chicago Stockyards collage, postcard made for PRS 1, 2013.
and a number of critical processes and precise means of realisation that resulted in a series of extraordinary buildings and propositions. Other formal links in this chain can be found in some instances of vernacular architecture, in particular the morphology of European medieval towns and villages as their plans and groupings of buildings developed over time. My time in Bergen from 2003 to 2005 introduced me to traditional buildings of western Norway and areas such as the Skot tegaten area in Bergen where small timber fisherman’s houses huddle together in multiple relationships to each other that are not defined by any obvious geometries.

**Erasmus Zone, Den Haag, 1996**

The competition brief called for a new community of one hundred and fifty housing units in a field on the outskirts of Den Haag known as the Erasmus Zone, an area without any previous urban context. Researching into suburban developments and scouring aerial photographs it became clear that, in the absence of specific landscape features, civic infrastructures (road layouts, sewers, electricity and utility lines) dictated architectural and urban form and that these infrastructures were predominantly organised around a grid that would then determine the layout and ultimate form of any development. The inevitability of this seemingly bureaucratic, and ultimately suburban, process of design seemed very much at odds with the conditions of apparent chaos, disorder, density, layering and random juxtaposition that characterize the city and dynamic urban form. Furthermore it could only render the individual as a subject rather than a participant in his or her environment.

I began to question how a break could be engineered within this seamless flow and to initiate a process whereby the different components could enter a dialogue with each other. If it could be presented as a game then what would be the rules that would allow others to play? These questions led to many days of staring at scraps of detail paper with all sorts of highly referential diagrams that, in the end merely rephrased my original questions: ‘How to……?’ The escape from my predicament came through an accidental and totally pragmatic tactic. There were to be 150 units of which one third would be larger units for people with higher incomes, one third would be for those of middle income and one third for lower income. I therefore cut out equal numbers of units into rectangles of coloured card and different sizes- orange for the rich, blue for the middle classes and grey for the disadvantaged and scattered or threw these onto an empty site plan. I repeated this action in a number of ‘throws’ which I would then interpret and tweak.
The random nature of this initial action allowed models of density and variation to emerge that could not be achieved by the overlaying of a single system. After these actions the throws were refined by the insertion of primary roads, parkland and secondary roads, causing further densification and disjunction amongst the plots. The first move opened up new possibilities for public and communal space, circulation and landscape. In the process of shifting plots a number of internal trapped spaces and semi-private circulation emerged. The existing canal system was then re-introduced, partly buried in culverts, exposed in parklands and running through trapped spaces and circulation routes which became small communal wetland ecological areas. Other trapped spaces became shared wild gardens. Public and vehicular circulation adapted to the residual spaces between plots and landscape.

fig. 80. Ground plan, upper level plan and composite plan.
fig. 81. Upper level plan showing rotations over ground plan.
Our concern was to break or agitate inevitable procedures of land clearance, road layout, orientation, distribution of plots and construction and in so doing to alter a number of variables that would disrupt any predetermined outcome and thereby liberate the plan. Writing about this project in 1998 for our publication ‘Action Research’ I reflected:

To recognise that one idea, or set of principles, cannot sustain a project is to admit a loss of control. To loose control shifts a predetermined process into game playing. To play is to re-invent, to assume new roles, write new narratives, to enter the mythic world of foundation. Play operates beyond conventional time. If urbanity, a rich mix of density, disjunction and programmatic layering, is achieved over time, the simulation of these qualities can only be successful by the incorporation of chance and the accidental. The current massive housing programme in Holland would appear to jeopardise this dynamic by a huge injection of normative matter. There are inevitable social, economic and political factors behind this. Yet the lost opportunity can also be attributed to the reluctance of architects to question precedent critically and in so doing enter an open ended future. The early modernist concept of Siedlung, for example, invokes the notion of settlement in or colonisation of unknown, virgin territories. In this missionary work rational, ordered models can be superimposed onto a razed surface. The endeavour depends on a position of moral certainty, a denial of any pre-existing qualities and an over-riding sense of being in control. To continue preaching this message, without belief, is to pay lip service to a bureaucratic inheritance.

Individual houses, of all social categories, were designed over two floors. The ground floor, generally situated orthogonally within each plot, comprised living, kitchen and dining areas. Walls are solid of masonry construction with openings that are provide controlled views both to ensure privacy and to extend living areas beyond the plot, borrowing neighbouring walls, the trapped gardens and the parklands. The separation of the two levels allows the steel-framed upper floor to shift and rotate independently to maximise privacy and orientation to the sun. This shifting begins to form local configurations and...
aerial courtyards. To allow for shifts and rotations between the floors the stairwell becomes an enclosed void space which extends beyond the imprint of the ground floor. The shifting orientation of the second floors of the houses towards the sun was inspired by the fields of flowers that were growing in and around the site, often under glass, and also by memories of walking through fields of sunflowers. Whilst the scatter plan at ground level was the result of a manual design process, the shifting towards the sun follows the precise geometries of the sun path.

figs. 84 - 86. Model of housing prototype.
fig. 87. Housing - first floor rotations.
fig. 88. Housing - clusters of houses around trapped garden spaces.
The Erasmus Zone is one of our key urban projects and it was successful because, by introducing chance and the accidental, we were able to challenge normative preconceptions of decision making and at the same time develop a new formal language. It was an important precursor to the notion of Serious Play because at its heart lies an open invitation to participate. It does this by proposing a means to play that has a clear and accessible logic generated by a simple action - to scatter. It was entirely consistent with the overall proposition that building plots could twist further and the orientation of the rotated housing elements could be altered by the residents themselves which, at least conceptually, might empower the residents and home owners. I wrote at the time: Housing has traditionally concerned itself with containment of the masses. To be housed is a passive act of submission. Sameness is reinforced by the multiplication and repetition of basic units within fixed frameworks. To inhabit, on the other hand, is to take an active part in one’s environment. It is to introduce diversity and choice.

Reflecting on this text I realise that my argument concerning repetition and the serial originates here and that the key to liberating repetition from sameness depends on creating an open framework or, in other words, Serious Play. I also now recognise resonances from my time teaching at Bergen Architecture School under Svein Hatloy and the underlying influence of Svein’s mentor and proponent of ‘Open Form’, the Polish architect Oskar Hansen.

31. ‘That is the typical problem of Open Form: how to reconcile the physical with life of buildings with their moral life...how to bring moral life closer to the physical one, in a situation where the latter obviously lasts longer than the former...for these reasons spaces have to be potentially transformable, able to recompose.’ Hansen in Conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist and Phillipe Pareno. Domus Magazine, December 2003.
The project clearly managed to communicate its challenge to contemporary Dutch orthodoxies about urban development. Perhaps there was something irritating about its assumed naivety? This became apparent when the local government’s urban design representative on the jury’s panel came up to us at the awards ceremony and told me that ‘we are not ready for this kind of work yet’. A year later, at a conference in Rome, a Swedish professor (and I cannot now find any reference to him) referred to the project by showing a plan of a small historical fishing village on an island in Sweden with a plan that was remarkably similar to our Erasmus Zone plan. I believe his point was to insinuate some idea of plagiarism to our project but I was deeply flattered, taking this as an affirmation that one of the logical outcomes of the scatter plan was the disappearance of authorship! On the other hand, and I shall describe this elsewhere, the project was very well received in Asia where it must have coincided with similar affinities and approaches to the city.

At this point a community of practice might be identified with the residents of Le Corbusier’s community at Pessac who modified, altered and extended the pure geometric designs that they were given to live in. It can also be found in a project such as the architects Alejandro Aravena and Elemental’s Quinta Monroy project in Chile where the invitation to extend and alter is built into the structural concept of each unit. In acknowledging and encouraging participation, whilst at the same challenging the idea of a finite, closed system the Scatter Plan is contributing to knowledge of participatory design by suggesting an additional skill set that the architect can bring to the table that places the contingent at the heart of his or her role.

Twelve years later we were again confronted with how to lay out a community of, this time, 242 units on a field on the outskirts of a town but before describing this in some detail I will refer to some other projects that we have carried out that occupy, in different ways, the territory of the Scatter Plan. They are not ordered in a chronological way and they do not necessarily present a consistent argument however I would like to consider them together as different examples of Serious Play.
Absolute Tower, Toronto, 2007

A competition entry for a 56 story residential tower in Toronto in which we were a finalist and also the jury’s favourite.

Our tactic was to reconfigure the brief by proposing that the single tower be composed of five separate towers that were gathered together in a cluster. We did not use automatic techniques but rather approached the project as a narrative for which we created five elements, or characters, that each had their own distinct identity. The building would be formed as the outcome of a dialogue between the five towers as they arranged themselves together. We studied the cluster block typology, in particular Denys Lasdun’s Keeling Tower in the east end of London, and noted that typically elements of a cluster are identical and that the central core is purely functional. We recognised that the cluster block is different to a scatter plan, it is centripetal and its components gather around a centre which opposite to the centrifugal tendencies of the scatter plan.
Typically each component of a cluster block is standard, if not identical, and this rule was something we could play with as we began to treat each component individually with its own facades and character. The core was enlarged to accommodate social and communal functions and we renamed it the ‘social core’. The four accommodation towers were then arranged around the social core, kept apart just enough to ensure that each apartment would have optimal views and close enough to be in dialogue with each other. Whilst the towers were grouped together to fit the given site in a tight cluster further reconfigurations were possible given different site constraints.

fig. 96. Phase 2 competition drawings - axo view of cluster.
fig. 97. Model photograph.
figs 99. Elevation studies Model photographs.
figs. 100 & 102. Model photographs
fig. 101. Rendered view.

fig. 100.

fig. 101.

fig. 102.
Parco Solar, Plug-In Valley, 2010

The site of the Erasmus Zone was a typically flat Dutch landscape divided by irrigation dikes and without any distinctive landscape features. Although it was an artificially created landscape we treated the site as a tabula rasa onto which a new urban model for a housing settlement would be overlaid. The development of the Scatter Plan was in part motivated by the recognition that urban fabric is necessarily chaotic and disjunctive because it is an accumulation of often contradictory incidents and reactions to them (for example the cutting of a road or the overlaying of new infrastructures, demolition and the replacement of buildings with different alignments, or alterations to existing buildings). We wanted to replicate this process of growth through dialogue and reaction to what already exists and create a plan that reflected this dynamic process. The action of scattering individual plots and the accidental outcomes occasioned by this method allowed a version of the simulated passage of time to generate the plan.
The Parco Solar project had a more complex brief and a very different geographical context to Den Haag. It was an open call for proposals for a sequence of spectacularly engineered viaducts along the soon-to-be abandoned Autostrada del Sole north of Reggio Calabria, at the tip of the boot of Italy. Our proposal was to transform the Autostrada into a green parkland spine that would connect and activate a series of what we termed ‘plug-in valleys’. These valleys were to become new agrarian communities occupying a patchwork of available land for the cultivation of bio-fuels, olives and food. Each settled valley has a vertical structure that plugs into the viaduct to provide accommodation, processing facilities and spaces for hikers and others using the park. The project has an underlying post apocalyptic utopian narrative and suggests a new lifestyle for refugees from the city based on self-sufficiency and trading.

Part of the project’s community of practice lies in my interest in the later work of Superstudio and their projects such as ‘Five Fundamental Acts’ which developed as the group moved away from the architectural framing device of the Continuous Monument towards an interest in basic tools and, as they wrote, ‘the acts of human life’. There is also a link to the fringes of the American counter-culture movement of the ‘60s such as Drop City, the Dome Cookbook and the Whole Earth Catalogue. In comparison to such utopian and counter cultural projects from the 1970s, what most current environmentally based projects share today is their lack of a critical and alternative architectural, social and political position. As examples I will reference Foster + Partners’ Masdar City in the UAE or the numerous ‘eco cities’ in China as example of state-led topdown projects that are primarily technocratic both in their realisation and their future vision for where urban society might evolve to.

In order to re-purpose the existing highway infrastructure and thereby generate new patterns of growth and inhabitation that would be stimulated by the plug-in structures a different order of play was called for. The Erasmus Zone, because of its context and specific brief, called for a response which relied on chance and the accidental to jump start the emergence of a plan that could then respond to a series of further disruptions until it settled, or came to rest, in its final iteration. While there are formal similarities with The Plug-in Valley, particularly the way that patches of available land are activated, the Erasmus Zone is essentially a closed system which is confined to its site. The Plug-in Valley is a more complex form of play which is based on a plot (in the literary sense) that revolves around transferring the function, and even persona, of the main protagonist, the Autostrada, from a highway for the exclusive use of vehicles to a scenic parkland route for pedestrians. Transference is a term that originates from Freud and the practice of psychotherapy and is

to do with the unconscious redirection of feelings from one person to another. It is not my
intention to enter into this debate but merely to suggest that this redirection of associations can
clearly also work for an inanimate object such as an abandoned highway and that this creative
re-naming, or reassignment of role, already exists in play. In this instance the local government’s
decision not to demolish the viaducts because it was by far the cheaper option initiated precondi-
tions for play by introducing ambiguity into what the highway might be.

At this point in Serious Play the deltiological tools of recto and verso enter to provoke these
dormant ambiguities within architecture. We can refer back to Greetings from.....Chatham Square
where Mom has substituted a recto image of the beach at Coney Island, which she describes on
the verso, for an image of the multi-deck Chatham Square interchange back on Manhattan. Is
Mom suggesting that Chatham Square is actually a beach with 10,000 people enjoying the late
October sun? Has the New York subway system an alter-ego as a beach?
Points are established along the repurposed highway and new elements, such as the plug-in structure and facilities for accommodation and the production of food and bio-fuel, are introduced. The resulting configurations of this kit of parts are formed in response to the resistances of local context such as topography, orientation and access in a loose way that can contract and expand according to future demands.

The Parco Solar project was a speculation on new uses for the highway and its viaducts which, although they were designed by famous structural engineers such as Ricardo Morandi, did not have any commercial value. Our response to the brief’s invitation was to suggest a new use and therefore a new value for the infrastructure: that it had the potential to enable new forms of prototype settlements. Whilst the proposal was communitarian in its aspirations, it could neither be a private development nor totally self-initiated because some form of government support would be required to realise such a model. The projects in Measuring Emptiness range from speculative projects about abandonment and decay to commissions from developers to realise value from disused spaces and this leads me to conclude that, given there are multiple value systems for property, infrastructure and landscape, the assignment of an actual value and the naming of its new purpose is a critical field for architecture.
fig. 108. Plan study, model photograph.

Klaksvik, Faroe Islands, 2012
fig. 109. Model studies.
A proposal for a new town centre for the town of Klaksvik, the second city of the Faroe Islands. We were attracted by the extreme nature of the site and its constant exposure to fierce winds that changed direction according to the seasons. The brief was to propose a way to connect the sloping east and west ends of the town by transforming the mouth of the estuary and former port into a new district. We used similar methods to the scatter plan to find ways to generate flow and circulation. We made models with long rectangular strips of wood and card which we began to see as striations of programme and circulation across the valley. The striations form protection from the wind and direct flows of circulation. Circulation from the south to the water’s edge weaves across the striations in a manner devised to maximise protection from the winds. As these passageways and routes cross the east west connections they meet small squares and plazas that provide gathering points and sheltered landscapes. The passages are formed by openings through buildings that are offset from each other to give additional protection from the wind.

The proposal creates a new density for the town with a programmatic mix of retail, leisure activities, sports, public and cultural buildings and residential which, together with open spaces and event spaces, will sustain the centre economically, socially and environmentally. Residential uses are primarily on first and second floors. This leaves the ground level free for public and commercial uses.
fig. 112. Exploded view of linear buildings, detail along disused Autostrada.

fig. 113. Typologies for linear buildings.

fig. 114. View.
fig. 115. Aerial view, photomontage.
Off-the Grid Community, Westry, Cambridgeshire

fig. 116. Overall view and solar orientation.
Off-the Grid Community, Westry, Cambridgeshire 2009-

This project provided us with the opportunity to design a model self-sufficient community in Cambridgeshire for which we were fortunate to be able to test out and apply many of the ideas and concepts that we had been working with during the previous fifteen years. There were almost uncanny similarities to the Den Haag project, which I will describe below. The project was broad, ranging from the design of an overall energy system, to a landscape strategy, to the lay-out of a settlement for several hundred housing units, and the design of individual prototype units as well as factory units. It was, in many ways, a utopian project with similarities to developments that were built in the 18th and 19th century by progressive industrialists and entrepreneurs where technology, production and living and the well-being of the workers were seen as an integral whole in a fusion of benevolent capitalism with Fourier’s utopian socialism. There are also references to Ebenezer Howard and the Garden City movement. I will describe the project in detail in the text below, however the aspect of Serious Play that I want to concentrate on is our relationship with the client and his team and how our roles changed and developed through the project.

It was entirely at the whim of the client that we were commissioned for such a project rather than a large multi-disciplinary firm. Mark had approached us initially following the publication of our Christ Church Tower project to design very intricate insertions into a Listed Georgian building in Stamford in Lincolnshire. He had clearly enjoyed our working methods on his house which had resulted in quite an extraordinary scheme to enclose a lightwell and thereby create a sequence of new spaces that were animated by extendable and mechanised furniture pieces. This project had been developed largely through a series of iterative models which Mark called our ‘Blue Peter moments’. Mark owned a large and successful company that packed and processed vegetables in Cambridgeshire which were then sold to major supermarkets and at some point in the design process for Vale House process he invited us to join a corporate brainstorming weekend with his directors to discuss how they might approach developing a large parcel of land next to one of their factories that they had recently acquired from a local farmer.

fig. 117. Exploded view showing, from top, housing and landscape layout; middle overall view and solar orientation, bottom view parametric geometries and water routes.

33. Blue Peter was a long running children’s programme which often involved making of models from everyday materials such as sticky backed plastic and and washing up bottles
Mark had been approached by a former banker and trader in oil derivatives who was in the process of setting up a new company that would invest in anaerobic digestors. In the process of looking for sites and possible collaborators the trader had come across Mark and had persuaded him form a joint venture. Initial conversations about the project with Mark revealed that he was unsure about what he actually wanted, what was possible, and what an architect could contribute. His approach to the project was a mixture of idealism, that was almost utopian, and hard headed entrepreneuri-

alism. There were a number of components to the project including several hundred housing units, further industrial units, and some social and commercial elements but it was primarily driven by the desire to create a large anaerobic digestor plant that would convert commercial food waste into methane that would then be converted into energy.

The project had such similarities to the Erasmus Zone that it was almost uncanny. The site was located on the periphery of a town, it was in an area of intensive food production, and, because of its location in East Anglia in an area which had formerly been submerged by the sea, the land was completely flat and bisected by a series of irrigation ditches. The brief was more complex but it was essentially the same problem: how to arrange several hundred units in a field to create a settlement. We decided to use similar tactics to develop the project. The brainstorming weekend was clearly critical not only in winning the job but also in setting forth a design process that the clients could understand, take part in and allow them to participate in the development of the project, in other words an invitation to play.

We have found over the years that many of our clients do not understand how architects work and the tools that we use. They cannot read drawings at any scale and nor do they understand the language which we use to describe how the project is developing (and I’m referring here to clients who have included eminent lawyers, film directors and producers, writers, astrophysicists, entrepreneurs and extremely wealthy individuals amongst others). Admittedly I cannot pretend to understand how an astrophysicist or a film producer actually works and, whilst there is always a degree of mutual professional respect and trust, the distance in communication is always frustrating. We have developed a range of techniques to bridge this gap by challenging preconceptions about what we do and how we can represent a project. Whatever technique we eventually deploy, the aim is to build up a dialogue, or perhaps a platform for a dialogue, which the client can enter, leaving behind their own preconceptions and inhibitions, so that we can establish a certain degree of complicity and the preconditions for play; at that point a project can begin.
One play tactic that Nicola and myself often adapt is an automatic process whereby, instead of seeking a single solution, we break a project down to its components and then explore how many possible different iterations we can devise. This often drives our staff to distraction because it is a common response in design to fix on something that ‘you like’ and feel comfortable with. However it is precisely the personal favourite and the notion of authorship that we try to avoid because, for us, design is a process that should result in the unexpected and to keep this process alive and vital one must devise tactics to distance or defamiliarise oneself from the outcome. Ten or fifteen versions may emerge which we may edit down or we may suggest further configurations. Eventually the outcome of this process is presented to the client in the form of sketch models, sketches, drawings or 3D models and they are invited to respond. This response often calls for further reconfigurations and a further meeting the conclusion of which is the preferred scheme.
To invite our Westry clients into this process we decided to set up a game which we could all play. We made a site model and cut up the different programmatic elements into different squares of coloured paper and then made a series of throws which we recorded as examples that would prompt them to make further throws at our session. In addition we made a powerpoint presentation of model villages from the 18th and 19th centuries together with Ledoux’s Royal Saltworks at Arc-et-Senans and Ebenezer Howard’s diagrammes for garden cities. Our aim was to invite everyone at the meeting to participate and to show by example how actions of chance and the accidental could trigger and then form decision making. This process can be understood as verso because, similar to the way the blank area on the verso of a postcard is designated for a handwritten message, it is an invitation to add something personal that is at the same time physical: to leave one’s message and one’s mark. The recto in this case were the images of idealised worker’s settlements that were built by the more enlightened employers of the industrial revolution. These images were intended as a prompt and a way of encouraging the clients that to build a model community was a perfectly normal thing for them to be doing. I realise only now that the recto both reinforced and justified the notion that they were doing something that stood apart from current norms of development and was unique to them and the verso gave them a means to realise this.

The board members of Fenmarc were looking for a new model community that would, by virtue of innovative technology, be separate and distinct from ordinary developments. We learned that their corporate ethos was a combination of an absolute concern for detail and logistics, a desire to be different from their competitors and also to be innovative and forward looking on a broader social level. Their entry into property development was new and they brought with it unformed aspirations and desires to create something distinctive and extra-ordinary. Foucault’s notion of heterotopia describes the genesis and development of the Westry project more closely than the term ‘utopia’. For everyone involved Westry became a Foucauldian ‘counter site’, a distinct social and spatial structure with its own codes and aspirations that would be separate from everyday society yet fundamental to it (for Foucault the ship is the ‘heterotopia par excellence’ and he cites two extreme types of heterotopias - the colony and the brothel).  

34. Examples included Bourneville (1890s), Saltaire Milton Abbas (1760s) and Blaise Hamlet, 1811).  
35. Michel Foucault Of Other Spaces. Heterotopias. Originally published in Architecture/Movement/Continuité, 1984. Foucault writes of spaces ‘which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted.’
The invitation to a group scattering of bits of coloured cardboard onto a site model caught the spirit of the event, disbelief was suspended and the tone was set for a remarkable collaboration based on a close community of practice between ourselves, the company’s engineer, other key players in the company and a number of technical experts. This working environment enabled us to envisage and develop a masterplan that we felt to be exemplary. Our role was twofold: we had to give a vision to the emerging project and set the trajectory for its development, we also had to give everyone sufficient confidence that everything could be realised. To keep these balls in the air we deployed another well versed (play) tactic that we call the risk factor. The origins of this tactic lie in our desire, as discussed above, to distance ourselves from a predictable design process by building in an element of risk into a project such as something that we have never done before or, often, something that may at the outset seem impossible to achieve (this can be seen at another scale in the section ‘Nomadic Details’). The injection of uncertainty and risk can create a certain tension in a project that clients are alive to and will take on board. Identifying these risks involves collaboration and the complicity that I referred to in the introduction to State of Play. In the case of the Westry project there were numerous risks: could the technology for both the anaerobic digestor and the organic water filtration system be developed to work for the project? Would we succeed in changing the planning use of the land from agricultural to housing and mixed development? What would the scatter plan deliver? How could we design houses that followed from this process? The challenges were immense and the realisation of this bound us together with a common aim.

There were several innovations and contributions to knowledge in the development of the project which I will describe below through their different scales:

- Master Plan - mise en scene
- Anaerobic Digestor and Plant
- Organic Water Treatment Plant
- Housing
- Factory Buildings
- Regional Plan

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fig. 126. Early plan view based on geometries of water courses.
fig. 126. Later layered plan with roads, water and housing.
Master Plan - mise en scene

The car was the irritant that led me to develop the Scatter Plan. Cars and their gridded roads define the form of typical developments. Den Haag’s premise was to take this element out of the initial equation and prioritise other forms of movement and circulation, the car was not banned but it was allowed back into the scheme to negotiate a fait accompli. In 2000 I was a visiting professor at NJIT in Newark and I set Clarence Stein’s 1929 new town Radburn, New Jersey as the site for study. Stein designed neighbourhoods that were conceived as linear parklands ringed by small clusters of houses organised around cul-de-sac roads that fed into perimeter roads. It was therefore possible to walk through the town’s residential areas without encountering any cars - a surreal experience in New Jersey!

The Westry plan was generated by scattering and the 240 odd units are grouped across the site in loose throws. The units occupy a layered field of different landscape conditions that define public and private space and direct movement. At the heart of the plan is a parkland network that crosses the site which also has bicycle routes and waterways. Each house has two entrances, the first from the parkland spine and the second from the road. Cars are contained to two outer rings of roads.
DRAIN youth/adult facilities

hotel area (3/4 acre)

radius=250m

free area available for future expansion of the AD plant

retail area (1/4 acre)

office area

commmercial area

RESIDENTIAL

71 units   market rate 4 bed
123 units   market rate 3 bed
113 units   market rate 2 bed
16 units   market rate 1 bed

323 units sub-total

107 units sub-total

430 units TOTAL

| residential acreage: | 11 hect. (11000 sq.m.) |
| housing units:       | 430 units               |
| non-residential acreage: | 2.9 hect. (29.588 sq.m.) |
| retail floor space:  | 800 sq.m.               |
| commercial floor space: | 7000 sq.m. - 14000 sq.m. |
| office floor space (in 2 floors): | 2290 sq.m. |
| hotel floor space (in 3 floors): | 2000 sq.m. |
| public open space (incorporating child play space): | 27696 sq.m. |
| youth/adult play space: | 7356 sq.m. |
| open space inbetween dwellings: | 20340 sq.m. |
| child play space required: | 8600 sq.m. |
| length of on-site roads: | 3.743 km |
| length of roads on Elmside land: | 3.920 km |
| hotel area: | 3/4 acre |
| commercial area: | 1/4 acre |

fig. 130. Plan with final AD plant etc.
Anaerobic Digestor and Plant

The Anaerobic Digestor itself is a complex set of kit whereby food waste is processed into methane which is then burnt off to provide electricity. The digestor is essentially a large gut which needs constant feeding and the logistics of deliveries entailed complex choreographies of delivery trucks, wheel washing and so on. A byproduct of this process is the creation of digestate which can be used as fertiliser, it also uses vast amounts of water which needs to be filtered and cleaned. The consequence of this process was the need for several large sheds of up to eighty metres in length. After a long debate with the clients we managed to persuade them that these should not be the typical large crinkly aluminium sheds that can be seen everywhere across the landscape. Instead they should be consistent with the ethos of the project and we proposed that they be built from straw bales within a glue lam framed structure. The roofs were green and saddle shaped.
Organic Water Treatment Plant

The AD plant needed a constant source of clean water and as a byproduct of its processes it created hot water which we realised could be used for district heating, there was in fact sufficient to heat 1200 homes but within a limited distance from the plant. We also looked into using this heat for greenhouses. This water needed to be filtered before use and, together with the waste and brown water from a few hundred homes and businesses this amounted to a huge volume of water to be cleaned. Our researches led us to the New Alchemy Institute, which had operated in America from 1975 until the mid 1990s, where the Living Machine had been first developed by the pioneering scientist John Todd. The Living Machine comprises a number of tanks with thousands of different microbes, organisms and fish in which plants grow. It has the capacity to turn brown waste (shit) into potable water within a six hour cycle. We discovered that a Hungarian company had taken over Todd’s patents and had installed a few Living Machines that were able to treat the sewage waste from small sized towns in Hungary. Our designs for the Organic Water Treatment Plant are based on the Living Machine but introduced other elements so that it could become more integrated with the vision for the overall project. The tanks are partially raised to form a huge platform that is enclosed with a semi inflatable EPDM roof. The environment within will have sufficient heat from the AD plant to grow tropical fruits and flowers, the roots of which are suspended into the tanks. This provided a further source for employment and income, it also meant that the settlement could be effectively off-the-grid for all its water and waste requirements in addition to the electricity that was being created through the combustion of methane. We then proposed a visitor centre that is incorporated into the treatment plant for the local communities and school children to visit and learn about the different processes.
Fig. 138. Sectional details of Water Treatment Plant.
Housing

We designed the housing to be environmentally efficient and be constructed from sustainable materials. The guiding principal was, however, the layout and orientation of each unit which, as can be seen in the illustrations, were generated by scatter plans that we then refined parametrically with Grasshopper algorithmic codes to achieve the ‘best fits’ for solar orientation, views and privacy, and wind. What we had been doing intuitively in Den Haag by scattering and then shuffling plots and units to optimise their orientation and relationships to their surroundings could now be automated to some degree and the units could self-arrange and settle into their preferred configurations. This development was a very steep learning curve for us technically. For the clients, whose professionalism focussed on the exigen- cies of production lines and industrial efficiencies they had developed to process the perfect potato, turnip, carrot or parsnip, this presented a conceptual leap into a world of infinite variability and contingency that was hard for them to come to terms with and there was a sense that play was entering uncharted waters. Realising this we changed tack sharply to focus on the design of the individual units which we proposed to the clients would be constructed from pre-fabricated cross laminated timber sitting on very light screw pile foundations. In the course of this design exercise we prioritised solar orientation and degrees of insulation to create sustainable buildings which is very much in opposition the prevailing disposition in green architecture to what I call ‘eco bling’ whereby ‘green’ buildings bristle with a profusion of shiny eco add-ons such as wind catchers, and solar cells of different kinds.

An unforeseen consequence of the parametric site modelling was that individual houses, which already had the added complexity of two entrances, one from the street and one from the parklands, began to merge together in order to negotiate the sometimes conflicting priorities of solar orientation and privacy. We incorporated these constraints into the detailed design process in which we developed what we named ‘nested’ prototypes which are essentially interlocking pairs of house with variable party walls. This provided a certain intimacy between units that also allowed for more efficient, shared servicing of the pairs of houses.

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fig. 139. Plan of housing layout. The green areas are private gardens.
fig. 140. Plan of public green areas and routes, shown in green, so the reverse of fig. 139.
figs. 141-146. Parametric 'best fits' to optimise alignments for solar, wind, privacy and views for location of houses and geometries of individual plots, generated with Grasshopper.
There was a certain point in the project where our researches and speculation were so far ahead of the clients’ expectations and requirements that it was almost as if two or three projects were piggybacking onto one. This became apparent when we met with planning officials, funders, valuers and social landlords who would be managing the affordable housing element of the project. The industry expectation in Cambridgeshire was for housing made from bricks and mortar and it would clearly be difficult to begin a conversation about prefabricated CLT let alone interlocking party walls. One solution was for the clients to develop and finance the project themselves. Out of the blue two predatory Irish developer brothers approached our clients, they had acquired large plots to the north of our site and they wanted to talk about joining forces. We prepared a plan which more than doubled the size of the Westry project but it transpired that the Irish developers were not serious. The AD plant is complete and operating and other plans are moving slowly forward.
fig. 150. Exploded isometric view of typical two bed affordable house.
figs. 151-152. 3D volumetric studies of typical two bed affordable house.
Regional Plan

The optimum radius for an AD Plant to be effective, to gather enough food waste and to be efficient in terms of traffic movement is twenty-five miles. Using this geometry we proposed the regional re-organisation of the South East of England into self-sufficient ‘circles’ of food waste recycling and energy generation through AD plants. The ‘circles’ encompass cities, towns, suburbia and agricultural lands and the graphic suggests a reorganisation of the country into recognisable, local units that are not based on patterns of landownership or political boundaries but on the optimisation recycling and energy generation. It is a democratic model, in some ways a game board, that will provide a base for further layers of social and economic complexity.
Fit, Layer, Shuffle

Through the PRS presentations and in response to a particular insight from Jo van den Berge at PRS 3 in April 2014, I was able to conceptualise Serious Play as a design strategy based on a tier of three actions: to fit, to layer and to shuffle. The first action is a design process whereby we fit then, if something does not fit, we layer and when layering becomes purely sedimentary without a dynamic, we shuffle which is to simulate and then provoke self arrangement and new sets of relationships. Each tier requires different skill sets:

**fit** - absolute precision and understanding of tolerance plus a certain wit to recognise the ironies in what may be appropriate or inappropriate;

**layer** - the ability to recognise and respond to the overlays, disjunctures, gaps and correspondences that occur during the placement of different layers onto each other or onto a pre-existing condition;

**shuffle** - how to set forth a mise en scene that is activated by scattering elements into a field condition and how to develop an overview, or plot, whereby dialogue and reciprocity develop between the parts to a reach a condition of self-arrangement.

This leads to **play** - the dialogue between autonomy (self arrangement) and control (the actions of the players)

The projects described above fit within these categories (fit, layer, shuffle) to different degrees. This can perhaps be best evidenced by the Westry project because its complex nature and duration it encompasses all three categories and play occurs in all of them.

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figs. 156-157. Screenshots from Prezi presentation to PRS 4, Barcelona 2014, where I defined fitting, layering and shuffling as categories of play and outlined the deltiological methodology.
Scatter Plans - Conclusion

I have described the invention of the Scatter Plan and outlined its development and application through selected projects. This design tactic contributes to discourse around play and the instances from practice that I have evidenced show the evolution of a modus operandi for a responsive design process that disrupts the normative bureaucratic hierarchies of decision making by introducing chance and the accidental. The Erasmus Zone project is key because I discovered a methodology whereby the accidental grew from a demonstrative device to become essential precisely because it stimulated chains of further actions and possibilities that called for increasingly precise responses. The Scatter Plan is ludic because its simple and accessible processes invite others to play and this can be evidenced for example in the way that the Westry project developed with clients and the design team. The ludic is a critical process because, by championing the contingent with its open-ended invitation to play, it challenges existing processes of decision making and design that are often obscure and hierarchical. Far from diminishing the role of the architect by seemingly renouncing his or her authoritative and professional responsibilities, I would argue that unless architecture can excite and lead by challenging the imagination of our clients and public to question existing preconceptions and to provide them with new ways to enter into this dialogue, it will continue to lose its relevance.
4- Micro-Urbanism - Survival Tactics

fig. 158. Betel Nut Beauty, Taiwan. Illegal mobile structures project into the street to attract passing truck drivers.
fig. 159. Cover image from AD Urban Flashes.
4- Micro-Urbanism - Survival Tactics

Micro-Urbanism has been a parallel but complementary form of practice since the publication of ‘Action Research’ in 1998. It is concerned with the city, in particular the Asian city, and has developed through the medium of publications, conferences, workshops, teaching and the occasional design project. The focus has been on the informal use of space and how self-organising social structures take root. Micro-urbanism has a political dimension and it prioritises bottom-up processes whereby individual and collective actions evolve and bring change to the urban fabric. The work has often taken the form of documentation and categorisation of conditions but, unlike the work of Yoshiharu Tsukamoto and Momoya Kaijima of Atelier Bow Wow in Tokyo and their publications such as ‘Pet Architecture’ and ‘Made in Tokyo’, it has resisted the typological model whereby found structures and strange programmatic fusions are surveyed by students and then drawn in axonometric in a method not dissimilar to Durand’s great “Précis des leçons d’architecture…” of 1890. My interest has been ludic in the sense that I am not interested in ‘learning from…’ Las Vegas or ‘learning from…’ Tokyo for example but rather ‘learning how to…’. By ‘how to…” I mean how to engage in a given situation and work within it to identify sets of relationships that can then be recast. Typological work tends to flatten difference by emphasising similarities and in so doing it facilitates an easy reading of a complex world. Put another way, the detective does not solve the crime by researching similar crimes, he is looking for a unique solution to a unique crime.

Play enables children to appropriate an everyday object or a place and to transform it so that, for example, a stick becomes a gun or a cupboard becomes a castle for the duration of the game. The cupboard remains the cupboard but it has a brief parallel spatial existence as a castle and its construction details such as a door, a bolt, a shelf or a hole in the floor are likewise rescaled and given new meanings. From that moment the cupboard will always also be a castle in the minds of the players. I have written earlier about how suspension of disbelief is essential to play and my deltiological methodology argues that the uncanny provides the clue, or key, to undermine an apparent reality. In a similar vein the artist Genpei Akasegawa, a generation before Atelier Bow Wow, invented the term ‘Hyperart: Thomasson’ in 1972. Struck by the strangeness of a stair in Yotsuya that was attached to the exterior of a building but did not lead to a door, Akasegawa began to notice other enigmatic structures and objects that did not appear to have any purpose yet they were pure expressions of what he coined ‘hyperart’ which he defined thus:

fig. 160. market/trainline, Bangkok. Before, during, after.

39. reference to ‘castle in Spain’ - ‘absentminded dreaming while awake’.
Art is something a hyperartist sets out to make. But hyperart is something a hyperartist makes unconsciously - without any idea that they are doing so. A work of hyperart can have an assistant, but not a creator. In the end, all hyperart has is the person who discovers it.41

Searching for a name for ‘a defunct and useless object attached to someone’s property and aesthetically maintained’ Akasegawa came up with the term Thomassen after the famous baseball Gary Thomassen who had moved to Japan to play for the Yomiuri Giants and was legendary for never making contact with the ball. Where Serious Play distinguishes itself from Hyperart Thomassens is that it does not see the aestheticisation of the uncanny as an end in itself but rather as a way of instrumentalising it to become a guide to action. My argument is that the uncanny is the trigger to understand that the object that does not fit is actually a part of a different set of relationships that are not readily apparent. Play, like the uncanny, is transgressive because it suggests going beyond conventional limits by identifying and then appropriating elements that are ambiguous or do not fit.

This line of thought engages with the discourse on pollution and taboo that the anthropologist Mary Douglas introduced when she described dirt (which I will call ‘something that does not fit’), as ‘matter out of place’.42 Dirt, for Douglas, implies two conditions: ‘a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements.’43 Dirt, or the uncanny, has the power to challenge an existing order because ‘it is that which must not be included if a pattern is to be maintained’.44 Douglas’ reading had profound implications for me in understanding the urban fabric and also how working as a designer within this field need not be about creating order but instead about working with disorder. Douglas recognises this dynamic whilst also seemingly suggesting that disorder may be similar to Foucault’s notion of counter-site, or heterotopia:

41. ibid.
43. ibid, p.36
44. ibid, p. 40
Order implies restriction; from all possible materials, a limited selection has been made and from all possible relations a set has been used. So disorder by implication is unlimited, no pattern has been realised in it, but its potential for patterning is indefinite. This is why, though we seek to create order, we do not simply condemn disorder. We recognise that it is destructive to existing patterns; also that it has potentiality. It symbolises both danger and power.’  

Micro-urbanism and Survival Tactics are two distinct but interconnected notions and I will be exploring each in relation to particular projects. Micro-urbanism is a term developed by Ti Nan Chi of the Urban Flashes network and it is a tool to understand the bottom-up and informal energies that bring vitality and change to the Asian city. Survival Tactics is a lens that I use to understand the dynamics whereby people adapt to their urban environment by appropriating particular elements that offer them opportunities to innovate in creating new living and work environments. For example, the Bangkok suburban railway line which is also a food market. (fig. 160) Here fruit and vegetable are laid out on the ground up to the railway track itself. When the train comes, every twenty minutes, awnings are taken down and people move out of the way of the train which passes within millimetres of the displays of vegetables. As soon as the train has gone, awnings are let down and the space is again a market. In this case the key to Survival Tactics is the split second timing which allows for two separate activities to co-exist in the same space. Survival Tactics identify ambiguous elements (in a similar way to the uncanny) within the city and exploit tolerances to make opportunities; they are an essential component of Micro-urbanism which is a condition whereby individual efforts and resistances operate within the field of the city. Another example would be the ‘Betel Nut Beauties’ of Taiwan who sell this mild stimulant to long distance truck drivers from illegal makeshift mobile glass boxes on wheels that disappear from the street during the day. Austrian architect and film maker Karl-Heinz Klopf, who made a documentary film about the 100,000 or so booths, describes how

‘the potential of the street as a space for performing is here explored in a highly delicate way. Sometimes the girls will stray out into the traffic, waving and using dance-like movements to make their presence known, giving them a sense that they are the stars of the street.’

45. ibid.

Message: Dirty Cities - The city as a system of disorder is not a city of chaos but one of constantly changing value systems. It is inclusive, fluid and responsive to small actions. Matter, the ad hoc, rapid change and survival tactics - the stuff of Asian cities become the key other criteria in this developing consciousness.
Message: Urban Actions - There is an elemental aspect to the periphery. Things just happen. Parasitical growths around motorways. Illegal housing beyond the tracks. Industrial abandonment. All seemingly random releases of pressure from the centre. How to operate in this field? These urban consequences imply a shift from an architecture that is expressive of the forces within the city’s fabric to one that structures procedures for actualising the city’s fabric. IN OTHER WORDS LETTING THINGS HAPPEN.
My introduction to the Urban Flashes issue of AD Magazine that I guest edited with Peter Lang in 2003 was called ‘Dirty Cities’ and it put forward a lens for reading the Asian city based to some degree on Mary Douglas’s work: ‘The city as a system of disorder is not a city of chaos but one of constantly changing value systems. It is inclusive, fluid and responsive to small actions.’ My work with Urban Flashes was essentially to help with the creation of a platform for the wide range of participants to find a common ground for understanding this system of disorder and how to work with it. At the time we were fascinated with the concept of micro-urbanism that had been first developed by Ti Nan Chi, the Taiwanese founder of the Urban Flashes network. We discovered that macro level, top-down official interpretations of the city with their emphasis on continuing planned densification were resulting in conflicted cities precisely because this methodology could not recognise let alone account for the micro-scale initiatives and urban phenomena (dirt) that gave each city and neighbourhood its special vibrancy and character:

To examine the city from a macro-scale level is no longer effective when current chaotic phenomena are often illegible, and even more misleading under more formal analysis. We have seen efforts to invent or resurrect dominant structures, to demonstrate heroic rectifications, to reinforce the regulations and so on, in order to battle with the so-called urban ‘disease’. Micro-urbanism suggests there are internal realities to be investigated in order to describe how things interact and coordinate in the micro-scale realm that manifests the true spirit of a city and its people. The inner reality comprises not only repetitive, robotic activities but also a plasma of conflicts and actions. People survive not within a rational state but in this more plasmodial mode of living, as our observations generally have revealed. 47

Urban Flashes developed through a series of workshops in Taiwan, Istanbul, London and Linz. The workshops comprised week-long events with students, a range of international architects, artists, film makers, curators and critics alongside local activists. The most successful of these events addressed specific urban sites where critical issues

fig. 168 - Hwa-Shan District, Taipei

fig. 169 - Hwa-Shan - wedding shots

The proposals for the site had some influence and the Hwa-Shan Creative Park is now integrated into the cultural world of Taipei. Yet the real influence and discovery of Urban Flashes was that it crystallised a shift in focus to the bottom-up phenomena of the living, informal city where what we called ‘survival tactics’ could be articulated as an alternative to the more traditional top-down paradigm for conceptualizing the city. An example of the mismatch between top-down planning and the city of micro-urbanisms can be clearly seen in the freeway systems that cut through Taipei and effectively dissected the city. Built according to American design guidelines (legend has it that Taiwan’s highway engineers were all trained by an East Coast American guru) with their latent political agenda of creating the functional and highly segregated city of mobility, the elevated freeways are to be contrasted with the multiple and informal activities and uses of space below.

The AD issue was conceived to advocate for the ‘dirty city’ and also to be a platform to give voice to a generation of Asian architects and designers who were trying to work independently of Western influence. It set out to debunk the cultural and commercial dominance of Western architects who were at that time flocking to Asia to tout for work. It struck me that it was of importance to stem the flood of paens to density that architects such as Rem Koolhaas and MRVD, alongside more insidious commercial...
interests, were raising to justify large scale urban clearance and the construction of megastructures and gated communities that had little, if anything, to do with the actual context of the Asian city. In contrast to this almost colonial hierarchy of foreign influence, the enabling structure of Urban Flashes was such that local protagonists could bring their researches from the field to the platform for debate and use it to test out their ideas and concepts amongst their peers.

Urban Flashes was looking to alternative western models for understanding the Asian city in the work of more exploratory practices. Ti Nan Chi was fascinated by the ideas and projects from our book ‘Action Research’ (fig.169) and, prior to the launch of Urban Flashes, I was invited to Taiwan to give lectures in department stores, bookstores, galleries and schools of architecture and to discuss the Hwa-Shan workshop. I understood later that the number and range of my lectures was to do with the financing of my trip, but there was a real resonance between our discovery of the scatter plan and the challenges that Asian colleagues were identifying in their cities. They could identify with the ludic methods that were implied in ‘Action Research’ and the resistance to top down forms of authorship that they suggested.

Urban Flashes only lasted for a few years, there were further workshops in Taipei, Taichung, London, Istanbul and Linz but it slowly drifted apart under the strains of holding together a large and disparate network of strong personalities. It had been conceived as an informal organisation and a flash is, after all, only a brief moment or instant. Nevertheless the exposure to the fluid and informal environment and culture that I had discovered around the Asian city has continued to influence the urban projects and researches that we do.
Colonias - Las Lomas, Starr County, Texas, 2010-2011

Far removed from the density and layered fabric of the Asian city where the formal and the informal co-exist in dynamic condition of symbiosis, the border territories in Southern Texas have vast informal settlements that exist in isolation without the density of micro-urban experiences. About 1.6 million families of Mexican origin live in Texas alongside the border with Mexico in approximately 2,000 colonias which are essentially semi-legal informal communities that have been established on the outskirts of established towns. Las Lomas is situated near Rio Grande City in Starr County, the poorest county in the USA. It comprises ad hoc houses that have been put together over time on dusty and unmetalled roads. The Colonias is prone to flooding and landslides and it is

fig. 167. View of Las Lomas Colonias. Rio Grande City is on the horizon with the Mexican border beyond. Note US government surveillance towers in the background.
poorly served by utility companies or any social facilities. Many of the residents were formerly seasonal workers who had picked fruit and vegetables in California and elsewhere. The Colonias are social, political and environmental phenomena that are largely unknown across the USA and rarely discussed.

The project took the form of a collaboration between myself, Peter Lang, who was at the time teaching at Texas A&M in College Station, and Robert Mull, the former Head of School at London Metropolitan University. Our intention was to form an educational platform across several universities in order to study conditions within a colonias and to explore appropriate design interventions. The territory of interest intersects with the work of Teddy Cruz in California but, whereas Teddy is concerned with the border itself, and interactions and influences between communities on either side of the border, our concerns were focussed solely on the colonias and their relationship with Texas and the USA. We visited Las Lomas in 2010 and then the following year with a group of students. The harsh desert environment and the isolation of Las Lomas were diametrically opposed to the densely populated Asian city. Poverty was glaring amidst one of the most heavily surveilled environments I have ever encountered (because Las Lomas is only a few miles away from the Rio Grande and the border with Mexico the sky is full with constant drones and the landscape is dotted with structures for surveillance). In many ways the project revealed the irrelevance of architecture to such a situation, there were no budgets for public buildings or their upkeep, nor the means to improve roads, services or the houses themselves. The inhabitants, we learnt from visiting and getting to know a few families, lived in fear of the gang violence across the Rio Grande centred in the Mexican border town of Reynosa which is controlled by the violent Gulf Cartel syndicate. They spoke of shootings and strange transactions in the middle of the night when large trucks are unloaded and reloaded in a huge empty lot behind their home.
Texas A&M University has a number of long term research projects on the colonias which largely focus on documentation and mapping of the settlements and also on environmental improvements. It was difficult to find an approach for shorter term projects. Peter’s students made a series of participatory projects where students and children painted a large mural together and we then held open air movie screenings, they created a garden and they worked on a more ambitious project to establish a local radio station for the community. The LMU students came up with very ambitious solutions that were either very formal or improbable to the community. So the project was a kind of failure. The idea of collaboration amongst academic institutions worked well but the reality of the conditions and the lack of opportunities in Las Lomas was overwhelming. I learnt here that, in such situations without longer term aims or possibilities for funding and broader support, architectural initiatives do not flourish in such infertile ground. On reflection I believe that the border with Mexico, particularly in its new massive corten steel manifestation, impacted spatially on the project forming a subconscious psychogeographic impasse or stalemate that stifled optimism and speculation and denied the pre-conditions for micro-urbanism.
Still smarting from the inadequacy of our responses to Starr County in Texas, we entered a competition for a bridge over the Tijuana River on the west coast of Mexico. Tijuana is a major entry point into the United States and 9 million pedestrians and 18 million cars cross the Tijuana/San Ysidro check point each year. Of these a significant number are illegal migrants who have been deported from America, often forced to leave their families behind who may have legal rights to stay. The experience of this threshold for pedestrians is harsh and they have to walk alongside highways and control points for cars in a highly politicised border landscape. In parallel to this research we discovered that every year one billion birds fly over the Tijuana River as part of the Pacific Flyover, the avian migration route that spans from Alaska to South America. They pause for rest and nourishment at the Tijuana River Estuarine Reserve which is only a few miles away from the proposed bridge. 370 different species of birds have been recorded here. The brief called for the bridge to have some social facilities, shower rooms, information, medical help and a dormitory so that travellers could have somewhere safe to spend some time, charge their phones and contact relatives together with learning and community facilities for local communities.

We wanted to draw a parallel between the migratory birds who are free to travel across borders and migrants who are not. The bridge will be a place of refuge, a counter-site suspended over a dry river bed, with a geometry that was do both with flow and stoppage around a settlement, or encampment, of randomly placed circular shaped pavilions which provide facilities, shade, and rest. A network of columns of different sizes is arranged across the river bed and to support the bridge. These columns are for birds and humans and provide nesting boxes, planting, telephone/charging and wifi points, benches and other facilities. Some of them can be inhabited.

figs. 171 - 172. Vintage postcards of Tijuana.
The project was partly inspired by two postcards that I had found of Tijuana from the 1950s and 60s (figs. 171-172). They both show a typical wild west frontier town with a Main Street. The first, which I call Ron Castillo, is extraordinary because the street has been coloured green almost as if to match the Dodge parked in front of Woolworth de Mexico. The greening of the road surface dissipates the sense of movement, one could almost stop for a picnic on the lawn. The second is a night shot, blurred, out of focus and dominated by neon but, strangely, a graphic artist has dotted bright stars in the sky above that should not be visible given the amount of light pollution at street level. It could just be a printing error but a connection is implied between car, lights, neon and stars.
fig. 175. Plan of bridge.
Athens - Survival Tactics 2011-2012

Athens was the site for the Urban Design Masters unit that I taught with Camila Sotomayor, a former student of mine from Syracuse University. I quote below from the introduction to the unit, which was my most explicit statement about informal urbanism and survival tactics to date:

‘Unit III is not interested in master planning or top down design practices. We believe the emerging city has no need of an author. We hold aloft the idea that the role of the urban designer should be proactive, critical and engaged. This role becomes clear in moments of crisis and disfunctionality. We accept that catastrophe and excess are the lifeblood of the ideal city; while any ideal system also thrives on the struggle between informal versus formal. Our tools are the multitude of linguistic systems and narratives. The new urban designer is both an agent of change and an urban actor; always choreographing and curating the conflicting components and dynamics that make up a city – we will call these survival tactics...Throughout history the fear of chaos has driven the concept of the ideal city into the arena of paranoid construction, where the ideal is structured as a defence against the “irrational” aspects of a society.’
We had chosen to study Athens at a time of crisis because the city was undergoing a process of profound self re-evaluation. On our trip we took part in meetings and debates with architects, urbanists, radical anarchist squatters and citizens about alternative futures for the city which were optimistic, inventive, pragmatic, heartfelt and highly creative. Against the background of abandonment, rising unemployment, rapidly declining standards of living, political uncertainty and violence we were able to witness new concepts and tactics taking root such as the notion of commons, alternative economies and new currencies, a new materialism based on re-use, urban game playing and new approaches to multiculturalism. We used the term Survival Tactics to prompt our students to unpack their own toolkits for action on the city. We suggested to them that micro-urbanism and close attention to bottom-up processes and phenomena within the city can affect change by influencing new patterns of behaviour and strategies for survival within the city and that the re-arrangement of found conditions and new urban choreographies for the existing situation could suggest processes for endless re-invention.

fig. 179. Andi Schmied, Veramikos matrix.

The students responded by identifying areas of interest within the city and developing tactics to heighten awareness of the tendencies that they had uncovered in order to develop propositions. The projects are illustrated with descriptive captions and I have selected four examples that deal with different aspects: Jongtai Jung focussed on trading and alternative economies within Athens and speculated on how this could be developed into a citywide network. Rong looked at an area of abandonment in the centre comprising an empty football stadium and former army barracks with a view to repurposing them to new flexible social uses. Andi studied a huge and dangerous peripheral site called Veramikos and developed play tactics to re-animate it. Xi Zhang discovered the semi abandoned village of Anfiotika at the base of the Acropolis and proposed that the simple terraced village typology by expanded into a new framework for future development to become what she termed the ‘turbo-village’.

The development of individual students’ projects, in the context of the exigencies of everyday life in Athens, helped to put many of my ideas into sharp relief and to clarify my views on the informal city. The contribution of the work of this studio was to demonstrate that the architect/urban designer must adopt tactics of direct involvement and participation in defining moments of urban crisis. This position built on the urban tactics that I had been working with since the mid 1990s with BMA, the Urban Flashes network and in various teaching appointments. In the case of Athens it became clear that, in order to negotiate and adapt to chaos and the decline of systems, it is essential for us to reach out beyond our discipline in order to revitalise it and give it relevance. It is no coincidence that the social and political upheavals of the late 1960s in Europe and North America impacted directly on educational systems and thus on the discipline of architecture. I had witnessed this directly as a boy in Chicago: the riots and the campus strikes and occupations when the school of architecture became the centre of resistance and my father, as the faculty representative, led the sit-in.

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fig. 182. Rong Yong - Athens. Re-purposing and dismemberment of stadium, Ampelokipi.
In 1984 Michel de Certeau outlined the fundamental differences between strategies (top down) and tactics (bottom up). By challenging the primacy of what he called the ‘the imaginary totalizations produced by the eye’ he argued that ‘the everyday has a certain strangeness that does not surface, or whose surface is only its upper limit, outlining itself against the visible’ this led him to alternative spatial practices which he refers to as:

‘a specific form of operations (“ways of operating”), to “another spatiality” (an “anthropological”, poetic and mythic experience of space), and to an opaque and blind mobility characteristic of the bustling city. A migrational, or metaphorical, city thus slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city.’ 48

De Certeau is alluding to the nomadic city that coexists with the sedentary city and is based on poetic and mythic experience. Serious Play positions itself at this interface and argues that the spatial skills of the architect are key to unlocking this paradox.

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Tainan - Sedimentary City, 2013 & 2015

I was invited to run a week long workshop with about sixty students at NCKU in Tainan in 2013, and subsequently in 2015. I had not been to Taiwan for about eight years and I had never visited Tainan. Tainan, I discovered, is a layered city with river systems that are now mainly submerged. It was colonised by the Dutch in the 17th century, it then flourished as organic and loosely formed Chinese city before being occupied by the Japanese from 1895 until 1945. The Japanese overlaid a complete system of infrastructure onto the city including roads, roundabouts, a railway line, canals, markets, factories and major public and commercial buildings. Since liberation Tainan has developed mostly on the fringes of the old city with the kind of density typical to Asian cities. Tainan City, the historical city centre, is a palimpsest revealing many layers which leave strange disconnects throughout the city. Here development has proceeded alongside a sedimentary process of redundancy, abandonment and disuse. I can characterise this approach as a form of cultural resistance to commercial led development and the tabula rasa that defined European modernism in the postwar years. This resistance is not particularly political and is rooted more in the persistence of a view of life that respects older generations and lifestyles and accepts that this continuing presence is vital to the life of the city. There is also perhaps a predisposition to postpone decisions. I will give a few examples below:

figs. 185 - 187. Tainan intersection - above and below.
When a historic structure becomes dilapidated or abandoned the city builds a corrugated roof over them on a green painted structural steel frame. The moment is frozen and life goes on around it.

In the 1940s the Japanese built a cinema that is elevated over a traditional market specialising in vegetables and fish. The cinema is now a regular food supermarket selling modern, highly packaged goods that sits on top of the traditional fish market.

In the 1980s the government designated an area along the Anping Canal as the new commercial centre, it was partially developed with an extraordinary hybrid flagship building known as China Town, designed by the architect of Taipei 101, the world’s tallest building until 2009, with shops, entertainment areas and residential flats over. The next mayor decided to move the commercial centre to another part of the city leaving the building to moulder and re-emerge for the last two decades as a semi abandoned but fully accessible counter-site for prostitution, drug addicts and karaoke bars.

The development of the railway cut a swathe through one of the main axes into the city necessitating an overpass for cars and an underpass for mopeds and in between this layering a temple remains with forecourt that is used by taxi drivers who stop for a nap.

Areas of the city have large numbers of empty apartments. This is because Taiwanese inheritance laws divide property equality between families so that a single apartment may have eight to ten separate owners who, because they cannot agree what to do, leave it vacant.
This was, in De Certeau’s words, ‘another spatiality’ where observation and documentation could not do justice to this minutely layered urban fabric. It called for a process of décollage to peel back layers, identify voids, gather forensic evidence of traces of activities, and propose new connections to re-animate them.

The workshops were called Urban Sampling and Mashups (2013) and Framed - Super-contextualism and the Micro City (2015). They were set up as intense fast group exercises so that the students had to work with their intuitions and generate material almost automatically. The week comprised twenty four hour surveillance of sites, non-site operations in the studio, and then a return to the site for installations. The emphasis was on the students to get dirty and immerse themselves in a particular pocket or layer of the city from which they would form a point of view. These research methods yielded fascinating material that documented the layered status of the city and framed the city in such a way that the students all gained new insights into their environment.

One of the successful techniques to represent the outcome of this framing was reprojection whereby students would set up projectors, or even multiple projectors, and project images directly on to their sites creating collages that overlayed, for example, daytime events onto the nighttime or, in the case of the cinema, the students played Japanese films from the 1940s onto the walls of the market below the cinema.
Postscript - A Ludic City?
**Postscript - A Ludic City?**

One of the sub plots that runs through Serious Play has been my pre-occupation with the monumentality of much recent architectural discourse. There is a body of perceived thought, and I have picked up this trace from Huizinga’s strictures, that architecture is a serious trade and that we should accordingly produce buildings and spaces that are enduring and reinforce this formal view of the building as monument. This perception is embodied in many iconic buildings and it also pervades how we view public space. My evidence for this comes from the handful of competitions that we have entered over the past few years concerning public space. We have used these competitions, such as the bridge in Tijuana, to address issues that we consider critical and we have tried to engage with social and political issues as way to generate proposals that do not prioritise the formal. Inevitably the competitions’ winning entries have been monumental and highly formal; for example the Tijuana prize went to a flat, stone-paved square shaped plaza, that spans the river with no shelter or provision for activities or any support for the users of the bridge, the migrants. For some reason the public face of our discipline tends to flatten the potential discourse between formal and informal, between nomadic and sedentary, between permanent and temporary, between monument and anti-monument, between the playful and the serious. This flattening can merge multiple and often discordant layers into a single image and point of view much in a way similar to Adobe Photoshop’s layer tools ‘merge visible’ and ‘flatten image’. 49

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49. Coincidentally the term ‘dumbing down’ has gained much currency and Wikipedia defines it as: ‘the deliberate oversimplification of intellectual content within education, literature, cinema, news, video games and culture in order to relate to those unable to assimilate more sophisticated information’. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dumbing_down.
The title Ludic City has many obvious references to the Situationists but I have appropriated it and adapted it to describe one project which I approached from the lenses of this PhD: Deltiology and Serious Play. The project was a competition to re-design Centenary Square in Birmingham following the completion of Mecanoo’s Library of Birmingham building. The square is overlooked by a range of public buildings from different periods and at some point in the 1990s the artist Tess Jaray had designed a large coloured brick ‘carpet’ for an area of the square which had been disrupted by the construction of the new library.

50. The correct term being détournement.

fig. 195. Model view of Centenary Square.
The starting point for this project was how to invite the public to engage in the idea of a public space that might not be defined solely by water features, tasteful lighting, planting beds and paving (which inevitably the shortlisted five teams and the eventual winner proposed). I have alluded to the tactic of over-scaling, which formed the basis for the proposal, in relation to the project Centre of Attention in the section Fitting where I discuss the large step-like form of the insertion in relation to the work of Claes Oldenburg.

The project began with a search for a future recto image of the new square. An image that would both be instantly recognisable and capable of misinterpretation and revealing of the uncanny within the daily life of the city. The verso would talk of personal experience and interaction, of chance encounters and, most probably, something completely different from Moma. By now it was apparent that the new square must be inhabited by objects because a flat, low perspectival space is not a recto space. These objects should have a certain literalness, an immediacy that is both spectacular and instantly recognisable. In writing about Oldenburg above I had made the distinction between sculpture, which in Oldenburg’s case is often a scaled-up copy of an everyday object, and architecture where this process of transformation invites occupation as the object becomes object-like rather than a representation of itself.

In the meantime we had discovered that Birmingham had a significant industrial history in the making of furniture and with this contextual knowledge we explored how to figure the space as a room. What would be needed to give the new square the intimacy and accessibility of a living room for example? We tried blowing a chair up to the scale of Mecanoo’s library and we discovered that something resonated. The chair would be large enough to be inhabitable. The legs could house a spiral stair, the seat could become an embroidered-like herb garden. The top rail of the chair could become a viewing deck and the underside of the seat would give protection from the elements to an open air cinema or a dance floor with screens and lights fixed to the stretchers. There was an interesting ambiguity to the giant furniture. It worked well with the surrounding buildings which became more wall-like and the overwhelming mass of the new Library was somehow mitigated. Meanwhile visitors became lilliputian as they crawled ant like around the feet of the chair.

51. Refer to Message from...Chatham Square in State of Play.
52. Refer to Centre of Attention in Fitting.
As a draft verso I quote below excerpts from the entry text:


_a living room for the people of Birmingham. Two chairs, a coffee table and a new carpet will be placed in the square to make everyone feel at home. They are not ordinary chairs, they rise up to twenty metres in height. The dining chair has stairs, you can climb up through its rear legs._

MISSING YOU.

Needless to say the recto image did not fit the profile of what the panel of architects and local politicians were expecting and the entry sank without trace. I realise that inserting giant sized furniture into Centenary Square may not have been fitting yet the proposal is entirely consistent with Serious Play.

fig. 196. Aerial view of Centenary Square.