Serious Play. A Deltiology of Practice.

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Declaration

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Serious Play
A Deltiology of Practice:
3. Fitting.
Three Case Studies
Fitting. Three Case Studies

Introduction

1) Christ Church Tower, Newgate Street, London

2) Sliver House, Maida Vale, London

3) Centre of Attention, Sutton Scarsdale House, Derbyshire
In *Nomadic Details - Methodologies for Ludic Construction* I have argued that nomadic details can be free from their buildings because they communicate directly with their public in an unmediated way. The ludic detail need not be an essential part of a whole but rather a fragment from multiple narratives with its own independent life which can be experienced in ways that are similar to the deltiological methods that I have described elsewhere. In this section I will be describing projects that we have built at larger scales. The projects, like many that BMA have built in London, are all insertions of different scales into existing situations. These may be interiors, small plots of land, or larger buildings, but they all share complex sites with multiple layers of specific constraints. Each site brings its own challenge and the projects emerge as narratives of how their constraints have been overcome. A project is never approached with a generic or idealised solution and BMA tends to attract unusual, often eccentric, clients who are interested in the office’s working methods.

Constraints come in different forms: some can be self-imposed, there can be one single difficulty or a myriad of problems. I often identify with a community of practice of other architects where a response to a given constraint has resulted in something extraordinary. For example, the architect and artist Walter Pichler who converted and added to a complex of farm buildings in St Martin in Austria, near the Hungarian border, to form a home, studios, workshops and spaces to display his work. For certain reasons Pichler wanted to divert exposed rainwater to run like an aqueduct through the centre of his living area. This necessitated the formation of an open channel in the floor that would run through the space and exit under the main door. The water is collected from a flat rectangular shaped drain that is fixed to the exterior of the building. Two small pipes carry the water through the window cill from where it is distributed by means of a cast metal mantle into a pipe that runs through a cast concrete block before flowing down into the floor channel. (Fig. 1)

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Fig. 1 - photograph of Walter Pichler’s ‘Regenrinne’

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1. Emilio Ambasz claimed that Pichler’s project was ‘a plan to constitute...a citadel of childhood memories’, Museum of Modern Art Press Release, September 12, 1975.
Whereas Pichler’s ‘Regenrinne’ is a self-imposed constraint, Kazou Shinohara’s House Under High Voltage Lines of 1981 is a response to an external imposition. Here the site was bisected by high voltage electricity lines and the electricity company had determined an area of two circles which the building was not allowed to encroach on. (fig. 2) For Shinohara this imposition ‘meant that I would have to confront the power of the city that was intruding on the life space of these private individuals’ which he achieved by making ‘the power of individuals intrude to the furthest extent possible on the other’ by using the geometry of the two restrictive cylinders to distort and form the design of the roof which is then reflected in the interior of the house.

There is something humorous in both examples, an unusual or seemingly ridiculous intent has been carried through but with utmost seriousness and elegance (Shinohara has written that the house always drew a laugh whenever he showed the project in lectures). There is an art to the one-liner where deadpan and exacting delivery is essential and understatement and making light of adversity can highlight the absurd to best effect. These are tactics of Serious Play.

As evidenced from the case studies to be discussed in this section, my research has uncovered how the notion of Fitting has evolved to be a key tactic of Serious Play. These examples will reveal how Fitting can be considered a method to develop multi-faceted responses to the shifting layers of constraints and opportunities that each project brings with it. I have outlined a range definitions of Fitting below by formulating a series of questions and statements which are to be read alongside the following postcards and animation (see pages 6 & 7).

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Fig. 2. House Under High Voltage Lines, drawing after K. Shinohara.

Fitting 2
Loose fit - a combination of chance and controlled accident that is then engineered to bring out and reconcile difference by highlighting certain readings and obscuring others.

Misfit - 'something that does not fit or fits badly'. The tools of misfitting include: to overlay, to re-use, to misread, to misinterpret, to collide, to obscure, to montage and to juxtapose.

Fitting 1
- The bespoke object, perfectly fitted to its context both socially and aesthetically.
- Sometimes a few millimetres are the difference between failure and success. Sometimes the difference and distance between two proponents is to be maximised to stand any chance of survival.

Figs. 3-4. Postcards Fitting 1 & Fitting 2 from the series presented at PRS 2, Barcelona 2013. The verso messages have been typed for clarity.
1) Christ Church Tower, Newgate Street, London

Fig. 5. Quicktime Animation of ‘Busby’ animated postcard series presented at PRS 3, April 2014.
The outcome of a RIBA private competition, BMA were commissioned to convert Christopher Wren’s ruined Christ Church Tower into a family house for a widow and her two sons. The tower was all that remained from the church which had been bombed during the Second World War. It had been partially dismantled after the war because it was structurally unsound and it was then re-assembled having first been patched together with some large concrete ring beams. The brief was disarmingly simple. The client had bought the Tower for a very low price, presumably because nobody else could make a go of it, and she wanted to create a three bedroom house.

The project was of particular interest because it seemed somewhat incongruous to create a family home in a graveyard between the London Stock Exchange and Merrill Lynch’s London head quarters, just by St Paul’s Cathedral. The apparent impossibility of the project was intriguing: the Tower could not be more protected, it was both a Scheduled Monument and Grade One Listed which made it theoretically untouchable. Furthermore the physical constraints were daunting. The internal dimensions available to form a house were an overall height of 36.5 metres and a floor plate that ranged from 26m² to 1.7m². Additionally there were not many windows, which restricted daylight to significant areas of the tower, and it seemed extremely unlikely that we would be able to make any further openings. It was therefore a great leap of faith to reassure the client that yes, it would not be a problem to convert the ruin into a house. That was before any consideration had been given to practicalities such as fire escape routes and access for the London Fire Brigade in the event of a fire.

The client was a mystery and still remains so today and BMA has been dogged by legal issues following the Tower’s completion in 2007 until November 2015. She had two different names and an obscure professional history working in the logistical, IT side of finance for different trading houses including the Bank of England where she monitored the physical movements of banknotes in the UK as they are withdrawn to secret warehouses and then released to suit demand. I never met her outside of the site or our studio and certainly never visited her home so there was very little understanding of her lifestyle and taste. She was not especially wealthy and we discovered through the construction process that the project was highly leveraged to the extent that she came to site meetings with her bank manager to persuade her to release further funds to pay the builder. In retrospect I now understand how speculative the project actually was although, at the time, the client’s requirements were so bespoke and tailored to her family that it must surely be a longterm personal project. I will return to how this relationship declined catastrophically later.
Play- Stage 1

The project developed almost entirely through large scale cardboard models which allowed for the testing out of the different spaces and also for the client to engage in the more detailed decision making process. The arrangement of programmes for the house was decided on at the beginning and this was largely driven by the limited number of existing windows. Living areas were split into two parts with kitchen, dining and living room at entry levels and further living areas at the top of the tower. (fig. 16) Bedrooms, bathrooms and utility room were in the middle of the tower where the least light was. The proposed house had thirteen levels and this could only be achieved by removing all the existing levels within the tower with the exception of the domical vault at level 3.

Figs. 11 -13. Study model of the Tower, approx 1.5 metres tall.
Planning and heritage issues took over eighteen months to resolve. There was ultimately a case for the proposal because the tower was now derelict, it had been so badly damaged by the bombing, and the works of repair in the 1940s were so crude and expedient. Furthermore, because it had never been occupied other than for bell ringing and entry to the church, there was very little original internal finish or detail above the ground floor level. However there were a number of hurdles to overcome: the government had to agree to removing the tower from the list of scheduled monuments so that it could be lived in and this approval was dependent on the agreement of the City of London’s planners and design officers together with the consent of English Heritage. The initial concept was to remove the interior floors and suspend a series of pods within the space. (fig. 16) Vertical circulation was a further challenge and we first proposed a cantilevered external structure to the rear of the tower that would comprise a stair. The initial meeting with the various officers on site to explain our proposals was very badly received. The City of London wrote shortly afterwards with words to the effect that the proposal was not fitting (appropriate):

‘overall the concept of floor removal and insertion of pod accommodation is disappointing and is considered to pay little heed to the special characteristics of the tower and its unique internal spaces, particularly existing floor to ceiling heights, room proportions, window characteristics and internal wall finishes’
Play - Stage 2

Up to this point the play of the project had been speculative and confined to spatial and volumetric studies: what to remove, what to insert and how? This was followed by speculation: if we do this then the consequences can be this, or that, and they might look like this and so on. The negative response of the authorities raised the stakes of the game to which we responded by reconsidering our use of language, by adopting the tactic of wearing the opponent down through an obsessive attention to the minutiae of detail, and finally by developing tactics for negotiation.

The pre-application proposal was submitted with a straightforward ‘architectural’ description of the works. We had described the project in words such as ‘demolition’ and ‘removal’, the ‘creation of voids’ and the ‘suspension of pods’. They were accompanied by very beautiful and carefully crafted renders of key moments of the proposal. I realised, with prompting from our planning and heritage consultants, that these words were either exclusively negative or spoke, and visualised, an architectural language that would be inconceivable for a heritage officer to accept because they describe a contrast between the existing and new. BMA then switched roles, as it were, to become advocates for the existing structure. There were no longer any voids (these were now internal light wells), nothing was demolished (floor structures were repositioned and reinstated) and suspended pods became grounded as internal platforms. Three dimensional drawings and renderings were set aside in favour of simple two dimensional plans and sections that flattened the spatially complex proposal down into a few lines.

The next stage was to produce a thorough documentation of the existing building, inside and out, in which we highlighted every single defect in the historic fabric and suggested remedies to repair and restate. We produced complex layered drawings showing, in different colours, the relative ages of every surface within the tower. Alongside this a historical report on the site and its history before and after Wren’s construction was produced by BMA. This material together with stripped out drawings showing as little detail of the proposed scheme as possible formed the final application.

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Fig. 17. Page from planning report showing the Tower in the aftermath of World War Two.
Our negotiating stance was that we would omit the cantilevered external staircase and concentrate on repairs and refurbishments to the original fabric. The scheme and the proposed alterations were sidelined. This new tactic had the desired effect. We discovered that the authorities did not want to consider the proposed plans in any detail. Instead they focussed minutely on waste disposal and the fate of the thirty or so headstones and memorial tablets that had been fixed to the walls of the tower in an ad hoc way after the bombing. We prepared detailed survey drawings of each headstone and then proposed that they be fixed to the exterior of the building for the public’s benefit. The waste disposal provisions were exquisitely designed with oak louvres and stainless steel trims. This done - we won.
Play - Stage 3
The detailed design of the project involved fully understanding the spatial constraints of the existing Tower and what impact regulatory constraints such as fire escape routes and fire safety would have. We also had to anticipate how the project could be built and what tolerances a builder could work to. It was at this point that fitting became the critical measure of the project.

We had permission to strip the tower of its internal floors and we had developed a design based on twelve different levels. The levels for the new floors and platforms were adjusted to bring the maximum amount of light into the building with the result that the house now comprised five discrete components:

- the entrance level, under the comical vault, comprises a dining and reception room with a mezzanine for the kitchen;
- the second floor is a stand alone living room;
- the third, fourth and fifth levels comprise double volume bedrooms and a floor for bathrooms and utility;
- The sixth and seventh floors form the master bedroom and bath room;
- The eight, ninth, tenth, eleventh and twelfth floors form the upper living area which is a single volume with a height of 17.8 metres.

Significant challenges were presented by vertical circulation. The tower had a stone spiral staircase with a diameter of 1.4 metres that had been built into one of its four structural piers and this led from the ground floor up to the eighth floor. The stair’s pitch was too steep and the headroom too low for it to be used as a regular staircase although we did get permission to use it as an escape stair. We therefore designed individual staircases to connect the different parts of the housed there are, in total, eight different stairs. There was also a requirement for a lift, the smallest possible, which is accessed on the second floor and rises up to the eighth floor.

Fig. 21. Drawing showing all thirteen floors.
Some of the different stairs and floor configurations are shown in the attached illustrations. I will briefly describe one of the more complex examples which is to be found on the fourth floor level. (fig. 27) Here the plan shows a floor area of 21.7m² which contains four stairs, one lift and two walls (I am excluding the lift enclosure walls). This is the middle floor of the three storey volume and it houses bedrooms for each of the client’s sons. To the top left hand side of the plan a flight of stairs leads up from the bathrooms below to a small lift landing and the two bedrooms. The bedrooms are double volume spaces and each room has a bed at the fourth floor level and its own flight of stairs, one alternating tread and the other folded metal plate, that lead to a platform above where a reading area and desk occupy the the meter deep recesses of the tower’s circular windows. (see also figs. 26 & 28)

Fig. 23. Final sections alongside model photograph.
fig. 25. First floor plan (mezzanine).
fig. 26. Sections through Levels 3, 4 & 5.
stonework: jos clean, repoint stones
crittal corporate W20 windows, one for access to balcony one openable for cleaning
powder coated mild steel plate restraining balustrade glass by glass/stair subcontractor
existing concrete ring beam: cleaned and left unpainted
existing solid bonded brickwork: drylined and painted, matt emulsion, brush painted
hardwood (cherry) bookcase
timber (cherry) soffit to underside of balcony
concrete floor RE. ENG DWGS & SPEC.
english oak
12mm toughened clear glass balustrade
1100mm off ffl
32mm toughened laminated clear glass floor
new, fixed portland stone louvres
crittal corporate W20 windows,  openable for cleaning & ventilation
bespoke spiral stair, with integral balustrade
new opening to stone stair
2 additional timber steps from stone stair, to be made from ply and clad in oak
powder coated steel plate restraining balustrade glass by subcontractor
recess studded out, plaster board, tape & joint to be flush with covered ring beam below.

fig. 29. Section Levels 8 to 11.
new opening to stone stair

dotted ring beam above

crittal type windows, openable for cleaning & ventilation

plasma screen, REFER SMC DWGS & SPEC

dotted line of mezzanine above,
REFER TO ENG. DWGS & SPEC.

new, fixed portland stone louvres

existing solid bonded brickwork:
dyed and painted, matt emulsion, brush painted

fig. 30. Level 8 plan.
fig. 31. Level 9 - library, plan.
Play - Stage 4

The construction process was long but relatively straightforward. Because each space was so specific and because we had been so concerned that everything, from the eight staircases and lift to sanitary ware and joinery pieces, would fit we had anticipated how everything could be installed and also the space needed for builders to carry this out. Our construction drawings described well defined tolerances to ensure that the insertions into the Tower would fit in a co-ordinated manner. In some of the more congested areas of the site these tolerances were down to ten or twenty millimeters. The contractor, a New Zealand builder with whom BMA had worked before, was very hands-on and proactive and we developed a strategy with him whereby all circulation, delivery of materials, and access to the building would be from external scaffolding that surrounded the entire tower. This meant that work could be carried out simultaneously on different levels by small teams of builders who would not be interrupted by endless traffic up and down the Tower. There were surreal moments such as pumping concrete from the nearest roadside access point, which was fifty meters away, to form the eighth floor slab and also the delivery of the sofas to the 8th floor which were placed vertically on top of the lift carriage.

fig. 32. Exterior view.
Hard Play - Stage 5

At some point towards the end of the construction phase the client discovered that there was a second abandoned Christopher Wren tower nearby called the Tower of St Mary Somerset. This was owned by the City of London and was on the national register of historic buildings that were at risk. BMA were appointed to develop a scheme and then apply for planning and listed building consent so that she could enter a legal agreement with the City to acquire it for a minimum fee on the condition that she refurbish it. This second tower must have presented the client with a way out from her financial woes because the first tower was costing more than she had anticipated. The first tower, which had been intended to be a permanent and longterm family home, would now be sold and the profit from this would, in theory, pay for the second tower. This was a game changer and what had previously been essentially a private folly was now a development for sale.

fig. 33. View of entrance.
The Tower of St Mary Somerset is smaller than Christ Church Tower but, because it had not suffered any bomb damage, much more of the original fabric was in tact. It is a beautiful structure and its roof top has eight extraordinary obelisk-like finials that are each 6.5 metres tall. The scheme is illustrated in the appendices (p.13, fig. 70). In brief it differs from Christ Church Tower because we were able to get permission to build a side extension to house a staircase and bathrooms. This extension was to be constructed as a load bearing masonry wall made of solid blocks of Portland stone. We also proposed the replacement of the roof with a glazed terrace. We had by now developed a good working relationship with the City of London and we were able to achieve all the required consents with relative ease.
Construction costs were again more than the client had planned for and, in despera-
tion, she turned to a svengali-like developer to help her. This developer was a strange 
man. He was, she told us, one of the richest private developers in the UK but he did 
not have a presence either on the internet or at Companies House. He did not have 
an office or postal address and meetings with him were always in the lobbies of large 
hotels, always a different one. His motivations were obscure, he was not prepared to 
put money into the project but he did want to offer advice. As events progressed mem-
bers of his team were introduced and again we could not verify their existence other 
than as directors of a trail of dissolved shell companies. We became convinced that he 
was trying to rip-off our client by embroiling her in a scam of some sort. The client
would not listen to our concerns. At one meeting the developer suggested that it would be cheaper if we substituted the Portland stone for the extension with reconstituted stone and that the planners would never know the difference. The client agreed to this despite our protestations. Shortly after this BMA resigned withdrawing all our support and expertise from the project. Our position had become too compromised: the client would not listen to us, we no longer held her confidence and we did not want to see the integrity of the scheme disappear into a quagmire of ill fitting and expedient solutions driven by false economies. We therefore took to the moral high ground. The client then realised, too late, that our role was essential to realise the St Mary Somerset project and, although attempts have been made to start up the project over the past eight years, it has never got off the ground because, without a clear under-
standing of how to construct it and how to fit all the components together, it is virtually impossible to achieve, particularly from a developer’s design and build approach. Our resignation rebounded badly on our Christ Church Tower project. Our client discovered that she could not sell Christ Church Tower for the price she needed to achieve. What started out as a very particular and bespoke eccentric project did not have commercial appeal. The past eight years have been taken up by defensive play on our part as we have had to deal, at various moments, with legal claims that attempted to make BMA liable for the client’s inability to sell the tower. This was finally resolved in our favour in late 2015. This has been a long drawn out phryric victory with low moments such as when the client refused entrance to the RIBA judging committee who had shortlisted it for an award despite previously agreeing
Rapunzel - Fitting and Serious Play

Christ Church Tower was an important project in the development of BMA. We were able to design a project within a historical shell without compromising our intentions and to discover a particular architectural language to do this. Because the constraints were so extreme, and so tight fitting, we had to rely on our ingenuity and invention to develop a new spatial language of extreme verticality and interlocking compartmentalisation that created a particular dialogue between the new and the old. The project was well received and widely published. It was an Architectural Record House in 2007 where the critics Raymund Ryan and Sarah Amelar wrote of it:

‘the once-neglected and war-torn Christ Church comes alive in ways Wren probably never anticipated. With ingenious and precise insertions, Boyarsky Murphy has created a domestic world that is surely unlike any other; in some sense a fantastic 11-story folly’ 4

My research for this PhD has revealed how this project was an important step in the development of my notion of fitting as a tactic to respond to a wide range of constraints. It built on the work of the publication Action Research which advocated automatic and intuitive means to generate designs by complementing this ludic method with a focus on the minutiae of detail and dimensioning that was required to realise a world that, as Architectural Record concluded, ‘is surely unlike any other’.

As an example of Serious Play the project illustrates many of the characteristics that I have been identifying in this PhD. The project relied on complicity with the client and a shared objective in the face of adversity, and at times, the sheer impossibility of the project, to suspend disbelief and develop an architectural idea and language that could sustain the project. As architects we assumed many roles and personalities, switching language and references whenever the project necessitated. A play-like literary parallel with the fairy tale Rapunzel runs like a golden thread through the project. There were wonderful moments solving creative problems of our own making and there were the devastating lows when we fought to fend off the evil developer and then litigation.

2) Sliver House, Maida Vale

figs. 43-45. Site Plans and Aerial plan view.
Christ Church Tower was an interior project and our focus was how to fit elements within its 17th century shell. This fitting was at the level of detail of joinery and jewel like stair cases made from glass, folded steel, stone and wood. Everything was calibrated to be fabricated off site and installed from scaffolding platforms that surrounded the fifty two metre tall tower. Millimetres counted! The Silver House was a different problem: how to insert a building into a highly restrictive site that had different constraints at every level. The house was formed in response to these restrictions, becoming a multi layered object.

Our client, Geoff, was a former Spider from Mars and backing vocalist for Ziggy Stardust (David Bowie). He had been a childhood friend of David Bowie who had co-opted him to join his band and go on the road with him in the early 1970s. Geoff had been living on the top floor of a large Victorian house at the intersection of Elgin Avenue and Shirland Road in London’s Maida Vale with his family for many years. The ground floor of his building was an off license and next to the building was a small sliver of land with a structure that had been used as stables for horses and delivery carts. The plot sat squeezed between the gable end walls of two terraces of Victorian buildings, one wall was solid brickwork, the other wall had a number of windows at each level. The plot was just under twelve metres deep, it was three metres wide at the street front and it stretched in a triangular form to be 7.5 metres wide at the rear. (figs. 46 - 48)
Geoff had been eyeing the site for many years. He had employed an architect in 1991 to explore the feasibility of building an additional floor on top of the garage. The results had proved that such an approach would not create anything large enough for him to live in and that the existing structure should be demolished. Geoff knew instinctively that it was possible to create a house on the site and he gave us the project with complete trust that we could deliver this for him. Geoff had recently edited a book about his travels with David Bowie in the Far East from 1973 to 1975 and in an interview with the Independent newspaper in June 2007 he described himself as ‘an “optinaive”, a regular paid-up glass-half-fuller, dangerously optimistic to the point of naivety.’ The stakes were high!

The windows on the flank wall were a real problem for this infill site because they could not be blocked and nor could neighbouring residents suffer any loss of light. Because Geoff still owned the top floor he would not object to the scheme but there was a real risk that his neighbours on the lower floors could stop the project entirely. The existing basement could be excavated further and could be infilled to take the plan form of the site’s perimeter walls. The geometry for ground and upper floor plans had to work around the flank wall windows and lines of sight from them. We made a series of models of the different floors and the constraints that each one had and then stacked them on top of each other, rotating where necessary. Fitting, stacking and adjusting these volumes became the play tactics for the project. At a certain point the volumes of the different floor plates combined together to make a building that would fit. This design process had been deliberately automatic because our interest was to see as many variations that might work as possible. From this point we discovered qualities about the found object that we had created that we could either enhance or omit.
This was an editorial process which was largely carried out by erasure (creating voids or taking away), by assignment (naming spaces and giving them a character) or by further fitting exercises.

I can illustrate this process with the following examples. In the first case the design iterations of ground floor left an outdoor space at the rear which could not be obstructed. This became a patio which would be enclosed on three sides by the existing brickwork. (fig. 52) In order to bring morning sunlight into the patio and to the living room behind a thin vertical notch, or crenel, was cut from the brickwork similar to ones that are found in medieval forts for shooting or firing missiles through. (figs. 54 & 58) When it came to the front elevation, in anticipation of opposition from the planning authorities if the front elevation was as fragmented as the rear elevation, the irregularities were sliced off with a single plane of obscured glass which became the north facing front elevation. (fig. 62)

Geoff enjoyed this process. He was happy to see the amount of energy we were bringing to the problem and he appreciated that he needed to put aside any preconception about design that he may have and follow where the project might lead to. He joined in by throwing in additional complications to the mix. Vertical circulation was not easy and we had realised that a single staircase through the house from top to bottom just would not work. We could achieve a straight flight from ground to basement and (just about) a separate flight from ground to first but then it got complicated because the stair, which had been running front to back, then had to cut across the plan. Geoff had two teenage daughters who could be extremely jealous of each other and for this reason he insisted that each of the girls’ bedrooms, which were to be located on the first floor, had to be an identical size. Now this would be simple to achieve were the plan form more regular but with a strange trapezoidal shape and the necessity for the stair to land somewhere sensible on the floor above this became a problem. Probably more time was spent on the design and location of the staircase from first floor to second than on anything else in the project. Every adjustment, every going and every riser had to tally with the number of square millimetres that were left for each bedroom.

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fig. 51. Axonometric view of rear elevation.
fig. 52. Long section against party wall showing relationship of house to existing windows.
fig. 53. Long section against through Living Room.

NOTE: REFER TO ENGINEER'S DRAWINGS FOR ALL STRUCTURAL DETAILS
NOTE: REFER TO ENGINEER'S DRAWINGS FOR ALL STRUCTURAL DETAILS.
Fig. 54. Long Section against other Party Wall, through Girls’ Bedrooms.
Flue mounted to existing brick wall d/w; 600 x 600
Client to supply

New 250mm RC wall, Ref. engineer's details

New timber firescape door with rendered reveals to existing brickwork

Existing brick wall retained

Level of ramp below

New 200mm RC wall, Ref. engineer's details

Storage

Indicative only, details to follow

Kitchen units

Rooflight overhead

New removable access panel

Remake manhole cover in wood to match flooring

Indicative perimeter drain to slab to falls draining to sump

Removable access panel

MDF access panel 600x800

Fig. 55. Basement Floor Plan
second floor plan

scale 1:25

roof plan

scale 1:50

fig. 57A. Second Floor Plan & Roof
Planning was another hurdle. The North Kensington planning team were not sure what to make of the project but they suspected that, whilst it was not in keeping with its neighbouring late Victorian stuccoed terrace houses, it might actually be challenging or even offensive to them. They wanted the building to be subservient to the Victorian buildings and whilst they might entertain a fully glazed elevation this would only be because it was lightweight. After a long process of negotiation and bringing in an expert to speak on behalf of the proposed design, the third floor was lost but consent was gained to build the house.

The automatic-like process by which we designed the Sliver House allowed for a certain denial or distancing of authorship. On the one hand we were slaves to the rhythm, to misquote the 1985 album title from Grace Jones, as we became innocent-like followers in the gestation of the project. This is certainly a ludic tactic and has been deployed in larger scale urban projects such as the Scatter Plans. On the other hand it gave time and space to allow for more intuitive and emotional qualities to surface in the project whose ultimate form could not have been anticipated, let alone articulated to the client. It also gave space to respond on a subconscious level to what Geoff had left unsaid in his briefings. I will illustrate this with reference to light, interiority and to contrasting narrative sequences that take place throughout the house. But first a deltiological interlude in Vienna....

In the summer 1988 after completing my diploma at the AA I travelled to Vienna with my father to accompany him while he interviewed Wolf Prix and Helmut Swiczinsky for the AA publication on Coop Himmelblau’s work ‘Blaubox’. We visited many of their projects in Vienna and spent time in their office which was a narrow suite of rooms with an office at the end which Wolf and Helmut shared. Here they would sit and produce sketches, often with their eyes closed in a manner that was somewhat similar to the Surrealist game called Exquisite Corpse. The sketches left the room and were handed to young architects and interns who interpreted them by making a range of models which then became the basis for razor sharp two dimensional sections. Sometimes these became buildings or installations. Alvin was trying to tease out what was behind this method and the interview reveals a certain amount of rock star, jamming bravado but it does succeed in engaging Prix and Swi in a discussion about the subconscious and the automatic which is very revealing:
'We feel that getting involved personally, what you have called ‘automatic drawing’, is a way of cutting through to the subconscious. We try to freeze a moment - our craziness, fun, excitement, happiness and sadness, frustration and élan - and we therefore have to be very quick. It’s like surgery. There is a lot of tension there because, after all, it’s our own lives and our relationship which is at stake. If you look hard at our projects, you will find traces of these things. We have found a way to make complex and non-additive architecture.'

Coop Himmelblau’s play, with its precise rules and procedures, hangs on the few decisive moments when two combined scribbles begin to suggest something. The moment is caught and then it can enter a more procedural world of architectural execution. Architecture here is an object or a series of fragmented objects that is created in an isolated, highly charged moment. There is a celebration of origin and of myth. Serious Play shares many of the same roots and I realise now that this period of work from Coop Himmelblau, which must be the most extreme example of automatic play in architecture in our times, has influenced us by showing one way to distance oneself from authorship. This is where the essence of Serious Play lies: the setting up of a scenario that is broad and loose enough to allow for the engagement of many different players who can take on different roles and identities, create and follow subplots but still follow the rules of the game. What makes Coop Himmelblau’s work so convincing to me is the way in which the initial wildness was then realised with such jewel-like crafted precision. Where it differs is that Serious Play seeks a more public and participatory route that must have a wide and intuitive appeal - this is where Deltiology and Serious Play overlap. The moment of creation should not rest entirely in the hands of a couple of rock ‘starchitects’, however talented and brave they may be. This moment should be open and this can be achieved by engaging the participants in a project with the invitation that they can influence form, and its multiple permutations, alongside spatial and programmatic complexity through play.

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We discovered over time that there was a certain desperation to Geoff. An early life of excess and glamour with his school mates from Bromley had left him a vulnerable and damaged child of the 70s. He had run out of money and the house was his strategy to make enough to carry on. He drank every afternoon in the pub and his beautiful wife had to take on a temping job for a solicitor. Geoff’s calm, youthful and fit mien belied a darker, tormented interior.

figs. 60-61. Patio and detail.
The house has a deliberate interiority. The outside world is screened off to allow only light in and a few controlled views out. The front elevation is completely obscured by opaque glass which reduces daylight to an abstracted, constant but surprisingly brilliant quality. (figs. 62-63) It provides background lighting that reflects the outside environment in a distilled way. Glazed roof lights were introduced to highlight key moments in the life of the house and two large slabs of glass provide the main illumination to the kitchen and dining area in the basement. (fig. 55). The ground floor living room has floor to ceiling folding glazed doors that look onto the patio. (fig. 60) As described elsewhere, there is one narrow viewing slot in the rear brick wall that focusses on the borrowed landscape of a distant park. (fig. 58) The two rear, south facing bedrooms
above both have fully glazed panels oriented to the sun and more complete views of
the park. The interior planning of the house creates a series of large spaces that are
connected, and sometimes interrupted, by narrow passages or stairs. This can be seen
on the ground and basement levels which are essentially single rooms and on the top
floor which is a single long rectangular space combining master bedroom, dressing
and master bathroom. Each floor is considered a separate element and the experi-
ence of moving from one to another is intended to bring out and exaggerate the con-
trast between these spaces and the circulation route. This is also apparent in the first
floor where the staircase cuts between the two bedrooms of the fractious daughters.
(figs. 55 - 57A)
A critic writing about the project suggested that this inverted and contrasting aspect of the house was an ‘essay in the essence of picturesque architecture’:

the main impact of the simple house they have produced in Elgin Avenue is an emotional one: the kind of emotion that comes from moving through small dark space, emerging into wide light spaces taking devious routes, delving into cave spaces. The last thing one might expect from a very little house in west London is an essay in the essence of picturesque architecture, but here it seems to be....This alternation -small space - big space - inverted space - goes on throughout the house. And you are aware of its front and centre position because the stuff of the house is so essentially modest.... This house looks like a simple proposition, and it is. The rules are few but severe, and the result is a proposition pushed to extremes.....So what we have here is another fraction of the indeterminable story of fragmentation; a site that is a spatial splinter, a chasm between the certainties of middle-class Victorian London. The constraints are hard, technical and spatial, there isn’t a lot of room to play around – get that space in! And almost (almost) incidentally, the house’s steady dedication to getting the job done throws off a rather delightful wake in the form of highly contrasting spatial values, expressed in light and volume alone.6

Tony McIntyre’s interpretation is based on the completed building and he was not privileged to insights into the design process for the project. Yet by referencing the picturesque he is drawing attention to an aesthetic design methodology from the 18th century that employed tactics of sudden contrast, irregularity and roughness to solicit an emotional and engaged response from the user. It has been a surprising discovery of this research to learn that these tactics resonate with those of Serious Play.

Since its completion the Sliver House has gained a certain notoriety as one of the slimmest, most narrow modern houses in the world. Geoff and Sarah sold the house and they have long since separated but Geoff’s ‘optinaive’ input and belief in us persists as an urban legend that pervades hundreds of global house and design blogs.

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3) Centre of Attention, Sutton Scarsdale House, Derbyshire

fig. 65. Photomontage of Exhibition Gallery over ruins of former Entrance Hall with reproduction of original decorative plaster ceiling.
I have included the Centre of Attention project as the third case study in this triptych of fitting projects because it doesn’t strictly fit. It strains my earlier definitions and has more to do perhaps with layering than fitting. The project was not conceived within a ludic framework of automatic making nor was it conditioned by the absolute tolerances that we were playing with for the Wren towers. It was an entry to an invited competition and it was never built (we discovered later that there had never been any intention to build anything). Nevertheless it is relevant because it was the first time that we used the tactics of rescaling and exaggeration to develop a project and this led to some of the projects that I have described and referred to in the section Ludic City. The project grew out of a series of collages and these led to a play with narratives that were discovered from the history of the building. The project was designed and completed with models which were then used for further collages. There were no drawings.

Sutton Scarsdale was a grand country house dating back to the 16th century whose owners’ had fallen into hard times after the First World War. The estate was broken up in 1919 and the house was sold to a group of asset strippers who, in the process of realising their investment, removed all its fine interiors, including all staircases, floors, roofs and internal structures, to sell. The house had very fine decorative plaster ceilings, in particular the entrance hall by Albert Artari and Francis Vossali, and wooden panelled rooms, one of which was sold to William Randolph Hearst in California and the other to a museum in Philadelphia.
The commission was to design an artist’s residency, a gallery space and a studio for the empty ruin. I was intrigued by the story of the asset strippers and the fact that elements of the building had been shipped off across the world. All that remained were the three and four storey walls of the building. However it did not seem appropriate to fill in what was missing by reinstating areas of the ruin and inserting timber floors and roofs that would creating enclosures. The objective was, rather, to create a more critical engagement with the ruin which would allow the public and visiting artists to interact with the building from unexpected perspectives and to consider the production of art within this context. The initial impetus was to re-animate the ruin by selectively introducing new stairs and ceilings. Through the process of collage-making the stairs became much taller than the originals and, because they needed to support floating ceilings, they became over-scaled. The collage process suggested a new skeleton framework of vertical circulation and ceilings that would allow for new ways of occupying the ruin and, because it sat on a hill overlooking the M1 highway, this would be a highly visible sign. A series of models were made to develop the collage work further in order to test different ways that the public and the artists could interact with the existing building.
figs. 72-74. Study models for additional stairs and ceilings.
fig. 75. Study models.
figs. 76-78. Study models showing development of giant steps.
As a result of this design process (its evolution can be traced through photographs of the models [figs 72-78] each element of the programme became a giant step which combined with other steps to form a staircase into the ruin. (fig. 79) Each step is constructed from a steel framed rectangle which is glazed and then clad with stainless steel mesh. The final step comprises the gallery which is raised over the former entrance hall. It has a glass floor onto which a reproduction of the original plasterwork ceiling will be etched and top lit from above. (fig. 65) From the gallery elevated walkways are provided so that visitors can walk at the former roof level through the ruin.

I discovered that the process by which the missing staircases become enlarged and extended, then exaggerated, and finally rescaled and inhabited, allowed for a dialogue between the ruin, what had been stripped out, and a new architectural insertion which could activate the empty structure. The step was rescaled from the scale of the foot to the scale of a person and as such it kept its legibility. This game could alternatively have been played with other easily identifiable elements from the house such as windows or doors, but not the decorative ceiling which floats over the former room and therefore retains its relationship with the original space below. The tactic of overscaling has some references to pop art and in particular the work of Claes Oldenburg. However, whereas Oldenburg might copy something from everyday life, blow it up and then place it in a public space as a sculpture or monument, the Centre’s steps are not monumental because they have been transformed by architectural means to become steplike rather than a representation of a step. As such the steplike steps are instrumental in inviting occupation of the ruin that is both imaginary and physical.

The elevated walkways extend our invitation to explore and experience the ruin in new ways. In so doing they reference Situationist thinking about the city and in particular a text called ‘Rational Embellishments to the City of Paris’ where simple tactics are suggested as the means to open up private and inaccessible parts: ‘With a careful rearrangement of fire-escapes, and the creation of walkways where needed, open the roofs of Paris for strolling. - Leave the public gardens open at night. Keep them dark…..Put switches on street lamps, so lighting will be under public control’6.

6. Quoted by Thomas McDonough in The Derive and Situationist Paris in Andreotti, Libero & Costa, Xavier, Situationists - Art, Politics, Urbanism, Barcelona, 1996,

figs. 79-81. Final model and montages.
figs. 82-84. Final model and montages.