Serious Play. A Deltiology of Practice.

A research catalogue submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Declaration

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Serious Play
A Deltiology of Practice:
4. Nomadic Details. Methodologies for Ludic Construction
Nomadic Details.
Methodologies for Ludic Construction

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‘Doing It Oneself’ - we started from a sense of frustration at the dullness of ordinary construction and the oppressive social vestiges of the Victorian house in London.

Materials:
The placement of materials can inform cohesion and spatial uniformity where every component sits within an overall hierarchy... from napkin to mullion. However note that this careful control can only be achieved by doctoring the image so that the airfield is blanked out and the illusion maintained.

Figs. 1-3. Three Postcards: Materials - Lacemaker, Busby, and O’Hare from the series presented at PRS 3, Barcelona 2013. The verso messages have been typed.
I will describe and analyse how, through research for this PhD, I have identified discoveries that Boyarsky Murphy Architects have made in the development of construction details for one material - glass, and the influence that this has had on the development of the practice. BMA has worked equally with other materials such as steel, wood, concrete, lead, fabrics and even leather, but glass has proven to be the most ambiguous and most paradoxical. It was also the first material that was worked with in any depth and the early projects that I will show provided a critical understanding of the potentials for materials and also the confidence to establish the practice. I will argue for the role of the detail as a nomadic and ludic element that is not irrevocably tied to the building in which it sits but rather has a life of its own. I have appropriated the nomadic/sedentary construct from Francesco Careri, a colleague and member of the Roman group of architects and activists Stalker and exponent of the practice of walking in architecture and urbanism. Stalker have been influential in my urban work particularly in their mapping of voids and emptiness within the urban field and there is a strong ludic element to their work. Careri identifies Cain as the sedentary *Homo Faber* and Abel as the nomadic *Homo Ludens* and suggests that the conflict between the two may be similar to that between architecture and the city. By cutting the detail loose from its architecture I am suggesting that it can be part of a more dynamic network of routes and voids such as are found in the city.

Postcards are the record of a journey: the recto is usually a popular illustration of the point where the purchaser of the card may be on this journey whilst the verso holds a personal message of direct experience of the actual place. The lined section to the left hand side of the verso identifies the addressee who is invited to participate in this dialogue between representation and experience. When it reaches its destination and is displayed on the mantelpiece of the home of the addressee the postcard becomes a momento of the journey. Delivered days or even weeks after being posted, the verso evokes memories of the sender and his or her relationship to the addressee. The message exists in a time lag, describing feelings and thoughts of the moment that have now been superseded by fresh experiences that the addressee can only guess at. The recto frames a stylized, fixed and impersonal view of place while the verso embodies the intimate experiences of the itinerant.

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1. Careri has written that ‘to play means deliberately breaking the rule and inventing your own, to free creative activity from socio-cultural restrictions, to design aesthetics and revolutionary actions that undermine or elude social control’ in Careri, Francesco, Walkscapes. Walking as aesthetic practice, Barcelona, 2004.
My argument concerning the ludic detail uses the deltiological method to highlight contradictions and inconsistencies within the normative production of architecture in order to make space for more creative practices that can engage with ideas and concepts that are usually excluded. This is evidenced by the structure of the postcard which is animated by the dialogue between the nomadic verso and the sedentary recto. I have previously referred to Marco Frascari’s writings about the architectural detail which he describes as ‘minimal units of signification in the architectural production of meanings’. For Frascari the detail is ‘the making of the joint’ which ‘can impose order on the whole through their [ie details’] own order’ and ‘consequently, the understanding and execution of details constitute the basic process by which the architectural practice and theories should be developed.’ However, whilst I agree that the detail is a fundamental element of architecture, I will argue that Frascari’s detail belongs to the world of sedentary architecture because it embodies a static and hierarchical notion of architecture. For Frascari the detail cannot be ludic because it is a constituent element of a fixed entity (‘the minimal unit of signification’) and as such it cannot free itself from its associated meaning or suggest alternative or ambiguous meanings. The sedentary detail therefore instantiates a building and provides a recognisable and, I would argue unquestioning, language for the expression, placement and sometimes embellishment of materials. It embodies the classical and modernist preoccupation for order that communicates a fixed message to its users. It is serious in Huizinga’s sense that

‘The man who is commissioned to make something is faced with a serious and responsible task: any idea of play is out of place. He has to build an edifice—a temple or dwelling—worthy of its function in ritual or fit for human use’. 3

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Fig. 9. Elements of verso and recto are combined, compressing what was previously a diptych into one simultaneous reading.
My research has revealed that one of the key originating themes and concerns of BMA has been to question the use, application and qualities of building materials. The intention has been to introduce ambiguity and playfulness into their use in order to test how new spatial and experiential qualities can be developed and in turn influence the projects. Instead of merely joining or connecting two materials together, the construct of the nomadic detail, which I have developed from exploring past projects, embodies the creation of a situation, or state of play, whereby the qualities and potentials of a given material can be explored and new relationships can be discovered. I will reference certain architects and artists who have influenced and inspired this approach but the key community of practice must be with the many skilled craftsmen, fabricators, suppliers, specialist sub-contractors and installers with whom BMA has always worked closely with. They know intuitively what can be achieved with their particular material and they are always open to new interpretations and new uses for it. This has always been a two way process: a dialogue which revolves around an understanding and empathy for the craft itself and the challenges of the new.

The details that I will describe below jump around in time to start with a house that was completed in 2008 (St Peters Road, Twickenham), then to two key projects from c1995, a detail from about 2004, one from 2001 and finally to a project completed in 2015. In reviewing these projects a pattern has emerged whereby individual details are often developed and tested out on a particular project, aspects of which might re-appear in a larger project. These examples may originate from something that could not be resolved in the first place, or they might be the further development of a problem or potential that was not obvious at the time. The examples are selective and this is not an exhaustive survey.
1) Confusing Roles - St Peter’ Road

The reworking of an architect’s own house in Twickenham, London that was built during the early 1950s in a period when building materials were limited and their use was still rationed. This had resulted in parsimonious environment with very low ceilings and a potpourri of different materials used to compose elevations and partitions. The clients, a writer and a publisher, had already been living in the house for a number of years and their aspirations were to extend it, to make an interior that would open up to the beautifully crafted rear Japanese-style garden whilst introducing light into an otherwise dull environment.

In the development of the brief it became clear that vertical circulation through the house was the key to transforming the house and we explored different ways of achieving this. The existing staircase did not face the entrance which denied a celebration of arrival and also the possibility of creating a vertical volume that could bring light down into the house. By removing the staircase and rotating it by 180 degrees we could create a route up through the house that could connect existing and new elements and also form a top-lit shaft of light. (fig. 11)

The project included the construction of a new floor and a rear extension at ground floor level. Glass and glazing became the critical agents of change throughout the house as they provided the opportunity to introduce light and transparency. For the additional floor three different forms of windows and openings were introduced. This included conventional dormer windows for the front elevation, which was all that local authority planning constraints would allow. To the rear we introduced continuous full height sliding doors which overlooked a terrace and the communal gardens beyond. At high level we formed a continuous clerestory window which extended daylight into the middle of the space by reflecting it down. A full height curved glass shower enclosure intruded into the main bedroom to catch light for itself. (fig. 11)

Fig. 11. Section, top floor plan and ground floor plan.
In order to extend light down the stairwell to the entry level the designs explored how to use glass as much as possible so that, for example, the stair landing was formed by a single sheet of double glazed panels. (fig. 13) The stairs were designed to be an open tread system of laminated plywood goings with a steel rod in the middle that was fixed to a steel plate behind the plaster finish. (figs. 12 & 14) This principle evolved from a study of cantilevered Georgian stone staircases that, we had discovered, were not actually cantilevered but lightly embedded in side walls and then supported by rebated treads. However a strict reinterpretation of the Georgian concept was discounted on the realisation that balustrades comprising steel rods or square sections would work against the lightness and transparency that we were seeking. The evolution of the design led to the discovery that structurally glazed panels could support the treads and act as balustrades and that these panels only needed a few discrete fixings to a concealed steel beam. This resulted in the seemingly weightless transferal of load from the treads to the transparent glass panels. This theme of apparent weightlessness was further developed to include a moveable bookcase that served as a door to one of the clients’ studies on the first floor landing. (fig. 14)

The design intention for the garden extension was to form a simple box with floor to ceiling glazing and a solid roof within which a large elliptical roof light could be formed. Typically the solid roof would require its own steel supporting structure and the glazing would then be applied to the outer faces of the structure. It seemed superfluous to the design intentions to have steel posts, albeit slender, supporting the roof and the possibility that the huge double glazed panels could support the roof by themselves was explored. The structural engineers had to be convinced that this could be achieved by considering the glazing panels as load bearing walls rather than cladding. Installation was somewhat complex because the roof structure had to incorporate a steel ring beam to bear onto the glazing. The construction sequence involved the assembly of the roof on the ground slab which was then raised and propped with temporary steelwork so that the glass could be inserted in place and the roof lowered onto it. This was further complicated by the corner junctions where glass met glass in interlocking butt joints which were then sealed with structural silicon. (figs. 15 & 16)
The discoveries from this project were that it was possible to substitute the qualities of one material for another, in this case glass for steel, and that this was, in effect, a confusion of roles as something that was inherently fragile became also substantial. From underneath, looking up through the glass landings to the almost invisibly supported open stair treads, it seemed possible for a conventional house to become open to misinterpretation and play.

This approach is to be clearly distinguished from that of Louis Kahn for whom materials were part of a holistic world where, for example, the simple brick aspires to glory as an arch that is itself part of a monumental edifice. Kahn saw latent qualities within materials which were predetermined and indisputable. It is also distinct from Frascari’s notion that the detail is the irreducible element of the overall construction which the architect assembles. Glass is, to the contrary, free to take on new roles, swap identities, and assume different and even multiple characteristics, thereby becoming ambiguous. Glass could appropriate and mimic architectural elements such as a floor or a curtain, it could become a stone, it could even capture and freeze organic matters in a similar way to a fossil and so on. In the context of my research, this newfound ambiguity for building materials became a play tactic that was close to my deltiological reading of the uncanny in relation to the individual and the city, but of an entirely different scale.

Fig. 13. View of stairwell.
Marcel Duchamp’s ‘Door, rue Larrey’ of 1927 has always been an intriguing precedent to me both for its economy of expression and the way in which such a pragmatic solution to the spatial constraints of living in a tiny apartment can result in such a playful construct:

To take full advantage of the meagre space, I thought to make use of a single door which would close alternatively on two jamb-linings placed at right angles. I showed it to some friends and commented that the proverb ‘A door must be either opened or closed’ was thus caught in flagrante delicto for inexactitude.  

Duchamp has here collapsed recto and verso (in this case the door in relation to the two frames) into one by means of two door hinges with the result that the door is always open and always closed. This ambiguity is revealed by opening and closing the door which reveals the strangeness of the construct.

A similar hinged experience to opening and closing Duchamp’s door can be found in reading a postcard as one turns the card over from recto to verso to learn to whom the card is addressed, who it is from and what the message may be before turning it over again to look at the image more carefully. This a spatial and temporal experience: one is transported to the location of the image and then back home to read the message, having taken in the journey that the card has made by the evidence of the stamp and its franking.  

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5. I have explored this conundrum by compressing elements from the Busby postcards’ recto and verso above.
Fig. 15. Elliptical roof light and roof supported by glazing panels.
This is a personal experience, a direct relationship between the sender and the addressee, that has only been shared by the postmen or women who have delivered the postcard. The found or used postcard is once removed from this relationship. Here the collector, or bricoleur, becomes the third protagonist with a role that is both strangely voyeuristic and potentially so creative. Being removed in time and space from the original discourse and seeing the thing for the first time provides the critical distance that allows for misreadings, misinterpretation and discovery of what I have referred to earlier as the uncanny. Exploring this in relation to Viktor Shklovsky’s writings on defamiliarisation 6 lead me to the surprising realisation that architecture, and its details, must be made for strangers and not for one’s family, clients, neighbours nor even broader cultural, professional or social communities of practice. It should be addressed to the proverbial man in the street (whenever or wherever). It should be conceived as if for strangers because such distancing is the critical communication device that allows for the third protagonist to experience, participate, misconstrue and therefore play. Bertolt Brecht’s alienation effect (Verfremdungseffekt) 7 enabled him to distance his audience from emotional involvement in his plays by using dramatic devices to reveal the artificiality of their dramatic experience. However, whilst Brecht’s motivation was to a large extent political and his artistry was in part designed to expose the realities of historical materialism, I am arguing for a distancing to heighten the physical and emotional experience by inviting the stranger to question what he or she perceives. I can best explain this interpretation by referring to two early projects that we built in the mid-1990s, the Glass Box and the Glass Stone.


7. Brecht described this as ‘playing in such a way that the audience was hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play. Acceptance or rejection of their actions and utterances was meant to take place on a conscious plane, instead of, as hitherto, in the audience’s subconscious’. Willett, John, Brecht on Theatre, New York, 1964.
2) Glass Box

A project for Nicola’s uncle and aunt who owned a theatrical and film make-up business in Notting Hill Gate. The shop was on the ground floor of a terrace house with storage underneath and they lived on the top two floors of the building. This was Boyarsky Murphy’s first completed project and it was largely a self build project which Nicola and myself completed with the help of an elderly West Indian builder called Lloyd.

The brief was to build a glass box extension that was to be suspended over the small garden which would have concrete fish tanks teeming with koi carp. We designed a single space that was enclosed on three sides by glass: the floor, the outer wall and the ceiling, which was itself a terrace to the living room and kitchen above. The structural engineer, Tim Macfarlane, shared our interests in exploring the structural qualities of glass and the project became an experimental prototype.

The cantilevered steel frame of angles was assembled by us on site. Twelve millimetre thick toughened panels of sheet glass were bolted to this frame to form the elevation. The floor and terrace comprised 25mm float glass that was laid onto the the steel angles. These floors were each divided into six panels which we supported on laminated glass beams which rest on welded and galvanised steel beams. We fabricated the glass beams ourselves, building plywood jigs and templates and then laminating strips of glass together with a special 3M VHB tape on our kitchen table.

Whilst the space was a simple one and the detailing expressive of its assembly, we were very much aware that we were playing with the idea and materiality of glass itself. The box became a space of extreme reflections and surprise for customers who entered it in search of prosthetic makeup and other specially imported specialist professional items and they were often disoriented by encountering the effects of a transparent and reflective floor and wall further compounded by illuminated fish tanks below.

Fig. 17. Photograph of structure and glass floor from below front elevation.
Shortly after its completion, in 1994, I wrote a short piece for AA Files in which I described the project as the construction of a series of inversions:

‘the conventions that govern the use of glass ignore the contradictions and inconsistencies that are inherent to the material. In searching for its positive qualities we propose a series of inversions:

- Glass is conventionally used in the vertical plane, as curtain wall, cladding or window. This admits light into a building and establishes a frame through which to view the outside. Used horizontally, as a floor, glass brings into question the subject’s relationship to a space and its materiality. The act of standing on a ‘window’ collapses movement and the distance between subject and object into a single experience. To stand on a window is to experience fear. To look through a glass floor from below is to experience space surreptitiously.

- The myth of transparency in architecture overlooks the fact that glass in its original unpolished form is opaque. Moreover, surface conditions such as light, reflections, dirt or imperfections may obstruct transparency, thereby providing multiple readings.

- Glass is commonly perceived as a fragile material. Because of differentials in expansion which prevent it from making direct contact with structural materials such as steel or concrete, it must be held in suspension. Laminating (layering float glass on float glass) and toughening glass, thereby harnessing its innate strength, enables it to be used structurally...Entering this box, one has a hemi-spherical field of vision. Floor, wall and ceiling open up territories beyond the physical enclosure, and light reflections on all the planes result in multiple, ambiguous readings of the space. Viewed end on, the laminated glass beams became opaque, arresting vision.’

I have highlighted above excerpts from this text to show their relevance to my argument. These inversions were a deliberate attempt to reveal and play with the contradictions and inconsistencies that are inherent to glass. To evidence my argument further I realise now that the glass floor grew to have a life of its own over time. Without any protective coatings it was scratched when walked on and continued usage of the floor resulted in the build up of these scratches. To begin with this alienated the customer in the Brechtian sense because the impurities revealed the glassiness of the glass floor and, by making it less transparent, the experience became less direct and the vertigo less fearsome. After a few years the scratching and marking of the glass had effectively reversed the industrial polishing and grinding of the original float glass with the result that it returned to its native semi-obscure state.

Figs. 19 - 20. Views of glass beams and terrace through front elevation.
Figs. 21 - 22. Structural assembly of glass box.
3) Glass Stone

Completed shortly after the Glass Box, the Glass Stone was a grave for my father Alvin. We wanted to use cast glass from the beginning because we felt it could bring lightness and movement to an otherwise static element. In the Jewish tradition small stones or pebbles are laid on the grave instead of flowers. Something about this desire for permanent marking intrigued us and led us to explore how glass could express both permanence and impermanence. The project has three elements: the stone, the tablet and the base. The stone is of glass, the tablet of concrete and the base of textured ferro-cement and we developed each through the positive/negative process of casting. In each case we developed the positive through drawings and models and a negative mould was created. This in turn was destroyed and transformed into a positive form. We made multiple moulds for the glass and cast versions in coloured resin. There was something about the process of transformation from the solid of the original model to the void within the mould and then to the cast object itself that, I realise now, was liberating because the play between positive and negative that was the essence of the design intention.

Fig. 23. Detail of glass stone.
Fig. 24. Models of casting process assembled.
Fig. 25. Full scale model for mould.
Fig. 26. Resin model.
Fig. 27. Watercolour studies.
It took a long time to find someone who could cast such a large a piece of glass. In the days before the internet was commonly used, searching for specialist skills was much more accidental and it relied on word of mouth and long gaps in time before letters or faxes were replied to. From our experiments with casting we knew that it was possible to cast such a piece of glass but the size presented problems in making a mould. Eventually we located Vlastamil Berenek, a glass artist in a remote village in the Czech Republic, who had been trained in the development of reinforced plaster moulds by the great Professor Stanislav Libensky. After visiting Vlastamil to understand how he would make the piece we sent a full scale model for the stone to form the mould. We learnt two important aspects of cast glass from this process: that it is opaque until polished and that it is alive with flaws and air bubbles which are the product of the intense heat of the casting process and then the slow annealing process by which the glass is cooled down slowly over a number of days so that it does not shatter. To highlight the impurities we decided against the polishing the entire stone and left the rear plane in its natural cast state whilst the other three faces were ground and polished.

The glass headstone was wedged into the concrete tablet on foggy and icy winter’s morning by five glazers from Preedys who, whilst overwhelmed by the location, gingerly manhandled the 250 kg piece of glass from its packing case across rows of extremely conservative graves in a totally professional manner. The tablet had lettering and dates cast into it and it formed the base for the gravestone which cantilevers from it. The actual base, described above, was slanted and raised from the earth to form a new ground-plane. Once removed from the ground it was indented with points that marked key dates such as my parents’ dates of birth and the day that they were married. The position of the indents was calculated to form a sundial for which the headstone acts as gnomon (the pin of a sundial) and shadows from it tracks these events on the appropriate dates.

Fig. 28. Detail of glass stone.
On reflection the glass headstone was a key project in the development of my research into architectural practice as Serious Play. The three elements interact with each other in multiple ways: as the elements of a sundial, as markers of events and relationships, as a mutually dependent grounding for the cantilevered glass stone and as a memorial. The process of design, model making and construction using casting allowed for multiple iterations and a way of embedding a project within all its phases of conception, development and realisation. The fluidity of the glass casting process is revealed by the captured air bubbles within the headstone which somehow counteract and challenge the fixed theme of the piece. The dialogue between the different elements is dynamic and constantly changing which makes the piece active rather than static. My researches have led me to understand that the translation of one material into another (in this case glass for stone) is similar to the allocation and then swapping of one role for another that is found in play. This has led to the discovery that the swapping of one character for another that can be found in the nomadic detail challenges preconceptions about the material experience of architecture by opening it up to multiple readings.

Fig. 29. View.
4) Ha-ha

Boyarsky Murphy Architects has worked on a series of projects that have involved the use of glass in the intervening years and these are referred to elsewhere in this text. I will conclude with a description of a project that we have recently completed but before this I will introduce another aspect of glass which is to do with the play of framing, artifice and vision. The precedent for this comes directly from the Swedish architect Sigurd Lewerentz who is perhaps best known for his churches and buildings for cemeteries. Lewerentz would sometimes form window openings in concrete or brick walls which he would glaze by fixing plate glass to the exterior that covered the opening and was fixed by metal clips. The best known examples of this detail are the church of St Peter at Klippan and the Flower Kiosk at the cemetery in Malmo. I became aware of this detail in the 1980s through photographs by Helene Binet but it was not until May 2015 that I was able to visit some of Lewerentz’s buildings.

My interpretation of Lewerentz’s detail is that it seeks to create an unmediated experience of a wall framing an outside view that also becomes a pure source of illumination. Unlike Duchamp’s ‘Door, rue Larrey’ which creates an ambiguous, mechanical moment in the otherwise ordinary domestic setting, Lewerentz’s window is static and seemingly inarticulate. However there are perversities and references within this window detail that belies its apparent moralism and suggest a more playful intent. The window cannot be opened, there are no hinges, frames or ironmongery. No fresh air can enter through it and nothing can be heard: there can be no direct contact with the outside world. Perhaps it is not a window? Is it an early example of the victory of optics over haptics that the Window catalogue of the 2014 Venice Biennale suggests? 9 Or was Lewerentz responding to Tristram Tzara’s challenge from 1936 that ‘The architecture of the future will be intrauterine’? 10 and suggesting a future for the church as the mythic cave? Was he referencing Brassai’s great photograph ‘Troglodyte’ of 1936 with its ‘cave mask confounding interior and exterior’? 11

One could go on with this ludic interrogation but its value has been to highlight that to question and challenge a simple construction element is to seek a new role for it in a new order of play which may result in unintended consequences. By placing the glass sheet on the outside face of the wall and dispensing with the layer of artifice of frames, hinges, handles and so on, perhaps the wall itself becomes the window? From the exterior the effect of the glass clipped flush to brickwork dematerialises the wall because we are accustomed to openings in walls having a depth that frames a view into the building. In this case the glass becomes more like a mirror, reflecting what is behind the viewer.
The project was to extend and refurbish a house for two writers who lived and worked at home. Their house overlooked a steep garden with a beautiful mature Cedar of Lebanon tree in the centre. The extension became a device to frame the outside world in specific ways. By restructuring the garden’s slope and building a raised timber deck we created a **ha-ha** that gave an uninterrupted view of the tree and exaggerated the slope of the garden. A large opening for sliding folding doors allows the living room to extend out to the edge of the ha-ha when it is fully opened. Husband and wife both wanted to work from a place that looked onto the cedar. Jeremy had decided that his study should be on the first floor with a terrace from which he could see the crown of the tree. Helen was less concerned about location and it was decided that she could work from the living room floor below. A large roof light in the floor of the terrace allows for visual communication between the two writers. When it came to Helen’s work area we wanted to create a space that framed the tree trunk in a specific way and was somehow both inside and out. A slab of slate was to form the desk and, in order for it to work in the space that had been provided for it, it had to project through the rear wall and beyond the building line by 225mm. The window was becoming a projecting window box which was designed in detail to be an unframed, interlocking four sided glass box that would ‘sit’ on the slate desk. In order for this opening to give an unimpeded view the window box was oversized so that it could be fixed from the outside. Unlike the larger opening with its sliding folding doors the intention was for the glass window box to become a more intimate ha-ha for Helen as she sat and wrote. The affinities with Lewerentz are clear but the design process was informed by the relationship of two distinct personalities and a broader intention to frame the outside world from the interior of the house.

![Figure 31. Construction details for window desk.](image-url)
5) Giochi d’Acqua (Water Games)

This detail is overtly playful and is a small part of a larger project for an eccentric collector. During the Mannerist period major Italian gardens such as the Villa Lan-te, built for Cardinal Gambara by Vignola, often had giochi d’acqua, or surprise water features. In this case the Cardinal would lead his guests into his terraced gardens to a secluded spot where, at the press of a button, he would activate hidden spouts that would soak his guests with water.

The designs for the house included a suspended shower room that spanned over a six metre tall stairwell which housed a staircase comprising a single flight of thirty-two cantilevered oak treads. (figs. 33 & 34) The client, Bill, had not wanted any handrail at all because he felt that it would impede his experience of walking up and down the stairs. Whilst we agreed with this aesthetically we were concerned about possible accidents and this then led to protracted negotiations in which we managed to convince Bill to have, as a minimum, a handrail without any vertical guardings so that if he did slip he might have something to break his fall. The compromise that we came up with was for the handrail to be clad in leather. Bill decided that he wanted a glass floor to his shower so that he could look down through the house as he showered. He elaborated this with the request for the shower floor to be switchable so that it would remain opaque until activated when it would become transparent. This would be a trick, or giochi d’acqua, to play on his guests. (figs. 36 - 37)

At the time smart glass was new to the market and it certainly had not been used on floors, let alone shower floors. The detail was extremely challenging to resolve. The shower had to operate and waste water had to be drained off without flooding. The smart glass (privalite) needed to be wired and kept separate from the 25mm float glass shower floor. Provision also had to be made for access should the smart glass fail. The key to resolving this detail was the stainless steel frame which would hold the different layers of glass in place and also serve as a shower trough. (fig. 38)
Fig. 34. View of shower box from below the stairs.
Fig. 35. View from stairwell to shower box and bedroom.
Fig. 36-37. Off and On.
Fig. 38. Construction details for shower tray.
6) Collectible Architecture - Delays in Glass

Boyarsky Murphy have recently completed a large residential project in Chelsea for clients who can only be described as members of the global elite. They own properties throughout the world and, in the case of this apartment, will probably spend no more than two weeks each year living in it. The clients are extremely sophisticated and they work with interesting and progressive architects on all their properties. They are collectors of art and the apartment features works by a stable of Gagosian artists including Cy Twombly, Yayoi Kusama, Howard Hodgkin, Andreas Gursky, and Piotr Uklanski together with significant furniture pieces by Poul Kjaerholm.
BMA’s input has been the design and layout of the apartment 12 which houses a collection of our individually designed architectural pieces ranging from furniture, bathrooms and a series of three individual mezzanine staircases to many different works in glass culminating in a nine meter long glazed bridge. Realisation of the project entailed a large community of practice including a team of craftsmen and women such as a saddlemaker, upholstорers, glaziers, steel fabricators, plaster restorers, carpet makers and joiners. The term bespoke has been in vogue for a few years in London and it reflects a particular consumerist expectation towards design that each piece be individually designed and tailored to a client’s requirement. I would hesitate to use the term Gesamtkunstwerk, or total work of art, to describe the outcome because it is a process that is perhaps driven more by clients’ acquisitiveness and their desire to differentiate themselves from their peers than a philosophical or aesthetic position. It does represent, on the part of the clients whose wealth comes from the data and internet industries, an extreme self-confidence and curiosity to engage in new ideas and to drive these hard. We felt, as part of this process, that BMA too was being collected but we were fortunate to use the project as an opportunity to realise a range of details and small projects in glass and steel that we were interested in. There were other aspects of play within the project which I will describe briefly before returning to the theme of glass.

The apartment is on the first floor of a Grade 2 Listed building overlooking one of London’s major squares. It had been formed in the late 1950s when two separate buildings were converted laterally into eleven different flats. The flat was large (400m2) but labyrinthine and our client was able to purchase it at a very reasonable price. The 1950s conversion had been designed and carried out by engineers and surveyors without any sensitivity to the scale and proportions of the original spaces. Rooms with ceiling heights of more than four metres were left with lowered ceilings and strange partitions and subdivisions had virtually destroyed the original plan form.

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12. BMA collaborated initially with Washington based architect and friend Robert Cole of Cole Prevost.
If a building is listed in the UK permission for any change or alteration to the interior must be granted by the Local Authority and alterations that are made without consent are criminal offences that carry large fines. The local planners and their design officers are therefore in a powerful position as guardians of original fabric and they defend this role fiercely. Intense and protracted negotiations are required to get any scheme through and this particular project took over one year with the help of planning and heritage consultants. Due to the 1950s conversion there was no original building to protect because what had originally been the piano nobile of two separate townhouses had been merged into one and separated from the rest of the building. Two grand atriums with galleries around staircases had been gutted and replaced by a central open lightwell. There was clearly very little integrity left of the original buildings and the proposal, which involved a large amount of demolition, sought to make sense of the space as we found it while making reference to the ideas about circulation of William Young, the original architect. However the planners had a different view and resisted the removal of original fabric. Ultimately we were able to achieve most of our objectives but not without some strange moments such as when the design officer conceded that while we could remove areas of original 19th century brickwork we would not be allowed to remove a similar area of 1950s brick infill.

Fig. 42. Night view of glass bridge.
Sometimes we were able to play the Listed building game to our advantage, sometimes we lost. There was no particular logic other than what could be achieved through personal negotiations and the give and take of a strange bargaining process with the officer. We resorted to producing exhaustive layered plans and elevations that identified what was original, what was from the 1950s and what was more recent. We drew reconstructions of what the original building may have been based on generic drawings by William Young from his publication "Town and Country Mansions with Notes on the Sanitary and Artistic Construction of Houses" of 1878. As the design developed it became clear that fire escape routes would not work without a bridge over the rear courtyard at the rear of the flat. Fortuitously Young had drawn a similar structure, a conservatory, on one of his generic plans. I duplicated and mirrored this plan to create a drawing of the two floors, each with a conservatory, and I sent this drawing (fig. 41) to the design officer arguing that the proposal was simply seeking to reinstate the conservatories. Whether there actually were originally conservatories is uncertain but the officer was convinced by the drawing and liked the idea of recreating an authentic element. He indicated that he would give his consent to such a structure with the proviso that the structure be ‘lightweight, fully glazed and minimally detailed’.

The nine metre long bridge conservatory spans six metres over the rear courtyard connecting all the bedrooms and providing a play area for the children. The floor and roof are of glass and the 3.5 metre tall external wall comprises six panels of glass, four of which are pivoting and operated electrically. We developed this design with a glazing contractor with whom we had worked previously. GlassUK were unusual because they owned their own production facility and they had control of the entire process. They were open to design collaboration particularly because of the complex construction logics. Because of their height (3.5 metres) the vertical panels were constructed on concealed pivoting steel frame to which the glass was fixed. (fig. 54)
When the project was on site the client decided that he wanted a moveable screen to separate an area of the living room so that he could use it for his study and achieve some acoustic separation from his family while being able to see them. The screens therefore needed to be transparent and we first explored casting resin panels onto which we could give texture and perhaps also place objects or materials into the resin to give some degree of opacity. Resin was relatively light which was our preference because they would have to be moved by the clients. However we could not find a manufacturer anywhere in Europe or North America who could produce resin panels taller than 3.5 metres (we were looking for a panel height of 4.07 metres) so we explored using glass instead. Glass would be considerably heavier than resin and because the panels had to be top-hung we had to design a sliding and stacking system which would require additional steelwork in the ceiling. Once we had worked out the geometric constraints for the stacking system which had to be able to disappear from the living room when the panels were fully opened, we found a company in Switzerland that could adapt an existing system to our requirements. (fig. 51)

The technique of lamination has always been of interested because it gives additional strength to glass, which expands its capacity, and also because it allows for the inclusion of content in the form of objects or layers of different materials which extends its phenomenological qualities. We had originally considered forming the glass headstone by slumping different layers of glass together (to form a striated and laminated structure) but this had been dismissed because only casting would allow for the creation of such an elegant and controlled form. In the event the air bubbles and impurities released in the casting process were a more accidental and less contrived way to achieve some of the desired effects. Whereas the casting process fuses everything together, lamination offers the possibility of layering distinct and separate elements together.

Fig. 44-46. Views of willow screens.
The intention was to laminate an organic material, such as branches or twigs, into the hanging glass screens so that the eye could rest on something that was preserved and suspended in order to create a break (resistance) in an otherwise seamless experience. This was to be, in Duchamp’s terms, a ‘delay in glass’. We were fortunate to discover a start-up glazing company that was interested in laminating material into glass screens and the project became their first completed installation. The process involved sandwiching resin into which branches were set between two sheets of low-iron float glass which were then trimmed and sealed with rectangular strips of the same low iron glass. After testing out a number of different prototypes willow was chosen because pieces that were up to 1.7 metres in height could be laminated unto the screens. Subsequently the same technique was used to fabricate balustrades for three mezzanine sleeping lofts in the childrens’ bedrooms but willow was substituted for long grasses and perforated paper.

Fig. 47. View of grass screen on sleeping platform.

13. Marcel Duchamp’s subtitle for his Large Glass the ‘Bride Stripped Bare by Her Batchelors, Even’ of 1915 - 1923.
The laminated hanging screens and the balustrades animated the spaces for which they were intended, elsewhere in the project glass provided a less mutable condition, replacing the brick walls of the external light well with full height obscured double glazed panels. Here the even light that they transmit registers changes in light conditions in more general and atmospheric ways and the screens provide a background and setting to the kitchen dining area and the cantilevered seating to the entrance way. (figs. 49 & 50)

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Fig. 48. View of paper screen and sleeping platform.
Fig. 49. Glazing to lightwell, kitchen.
Fig. 50. Glazing to lightwell, entry.
Full height pivoting door

Approx.

Door- 2 x 18mm mdf-laminated together & then routed to allow a Tee aluminium trim to be inserted on all 4 edges

BUSHFELD track @ top of door- turns 'corner' of door

Note bushfeld track stops short to allow full height door to open 90 degrees

Wall- encasing kitchen line of wall / ceiling junction

15mm gap between door & wall centre line of ceiling track

Resin Panel movement

Interior of panel storage cup- to be finished- plaster paint etc.

Wall - plaster edge beads etc..

Floor - encasing resin panel sides- refer to SK03 & 04 for further info

Ceiling channel- with edge beads etc.

Power feeds to bushfeld

Fig. 51. Construction details for laminated screens.
Fig. 52. Laminating process.
Fig. 53. Ross with prototype.
Fig. 54. Construction details for glass bridge.
Fig. 55. Construction of glass bridge.
Conclusion

In 2002 I was invited to contribute to an issue of AD magazine edited by Leon van Schaik called ‘Poetics in Architecture’. The issue centred on Gaston Bachelard’s 1960s work ‘Poetics of Space’ and contributors were invited to reflect on the influence and relevance of Bachelard’s work to their practices. I illustrated my article with images of details and elements from four recent residential projects to make the point that Bachelard’s oneiric house might not be one edifice but could instead be composed of numerous different elements or fragments. At the time I was preoccupied with how the intimacy and individuality of the house might provide forms of resistance against the increasing homogeneity of global society. I called the piece ‘The Technique of Space’ 14 which was a reference to Victor Shklovsky’s ‘Art as Technique’. 15 I argued that we should ‘discover the unfamiliar in our everyday lives’ and that if ‘we see the contemporary house as a site for the construction of difficulty and the unfamiliar then it becomes possible to speculate on privacy, intimacy, dreams, indulgence and self-discovery again’. The method that I put forward to achieve this was to use architecture ‘to reinforce the primacy of direct, unmediated experience’. 16

Fourteen years later the message still resonates with my current practice and I consider Serious Play to be a further iteration of this proposition. At its heart is the recognition of these potential resistances for materials and the discovery of the skills we have as architects to introduce ambiguity and playfulness into their use and application. The nomadic detail thus embodies the creation of a situation, or state of play, which invites the stranger to reconsider preconceptions and join in. Serious Play adds a further dimension by articulating ways and means for this to take place and to engage the many complexities involved in realising a project. Nomadic details are therefore signals and invitations to play and this is where Deltiology and Serious Play merge in a manner that is similar to the way I have brought together elements of recto and verso above. (figs. 9 & 10)

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15. op cit.
16. op cit.