Paradigms of Observation

_Azul Oscuro Casi Negro_
A Blue That Is Almost Black

A project submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; and, any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged.

Signed

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My father in absentia
My mother
Romeo
Mathieu

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AZUL OSCURO CASI NEGRO
A BLUE THAT IS ALMOST BLACK
“At the first signs of attraction, when the withdrawal of the desired face remains sketchy, when the firmness of the solitary voice is just beginning to stand out against the blur of the murmur, something like a sweet and violent movement intrudes on interiority, drawing it out of itself, turning it around, bringing forth next to it – or rather right behind it – the background figure of a companion who always remains hidden but always makes it patently obvious that he is there; a double that keeps his distance, an accosting resemblance.” ¹

“Meaning is created once something can be related to personal experience. Looking is invested with identity. Which is to say, public discourse is always based on the particular...the public – the realm of Language, Father, Law – contains, regulates or intercepts private experience, the subjective realm of dreaming, fantasy and desire.” ²

PROLOGUE

Politics / power
Names of projects
Names of clients
Nameless
Why name?
Intentions
Contentment
Disillusionment
Rupture
Cohesion
The un-realised
The ambiguous

A work of architecture holds the observations of the architect, an accumulation of images, feelings and sensations. These remain largely detached and invisible to the casual observer, occasionally becoming apparent as an idea is glimpsed through an external point of observation.

The research has looked to redefine the paradigms of observation, that define the way architecture is seen and interpreted, by exploring attachments to places and belief systems. It has followed a journey within practice. Part of this journey has been about locating the aesthetic and metaphysical experience of architecture within its physical and operational realities. The research is an observation of the architect experiencing, as an observer, himself, his place in the world, and of the cities and spaces that occupy his imagination. By observing the interface between things that have defined career and identity, an architectural narrative has been developed to describe how an architect's persona, what he lives through and the memories that he carries with him have been and can continue to be condensed into his work. Beauty resides in the interface between these things and ultimately, the fixed reality of the work. It is a place, which the author will come to define as the blue room, where things are at their most ambiguous and capable of being many things. How might this be observed?

The search is characterised by the appearance of the of the blue room. It is a metaphorical place representing both the present and the un-created future. The blue room is a metaphor for all of the emotions that rest behind the evolution of an architectural idea and which remain embedded within it as a finished work. It is a metaphor for beauty and a metaphor for loss and sadness, all of the things that exist in-between the idea and the representation of that idea; between the visible and the invisible. It also represents the inherent paradox of the architectural work in that the idea is never the same as it is first imagined; in its finished form it is both the space of the architect and the client.
The evocation of the *blue room* in this story (of practice) is part of the creative process. It is entwined with the idea of escape that is embodied in the quest to forget and remember trauma, an experience fixed in time, twenty five years ago. All other manifestations of the room are a distortion of that moment and an attempt to use the creative impulse to assert control over it by changing it. The opening up of the mind entailed in the process of discovering that moment (therapy) is inextricably bound with representations of the ‘room’ (and all that it constituted) because the room was created by the memory and it has come to be seen, in different guises, as something the author was fleeing from and to. Is it a room or the experience constituted within a room? (It is both). The writing of the thesis, especially since early 2007, has coincided with a period of profound personal discovery (and a journey into the deep recesses of mind) and it has been impossible to separate the telling of the story of Stephen, from the story of the work.

*Stepping in to and out of Stephen*

The thesis is written with two voices: the first is in the first person singular where I speak as Stephen (step in to me); the second is in the 3rd person where I step out of (being) Stephen.

The research began in 2002 as a study into Spanish architectural modernity; exploring its historical nexus with early twentieth century Finnish modernity. Over the course of 2004, this focus was slowly released as I made a definitive shift into the Doctor of Philosophy by project mode.

In 2005 the research started to connect with more personal territory to become a study of my relationship with Spain, and a search to define and translate the characteristic features within two places of practice. I then reflected on the notion of translation between Spain and Australia through my perceptions of it, using my work as way to speculate on the relationship. What this showed was the sense of things not quite being one thing or another.

In 2006, this was elaborated further. In the process other elements, both personal and creative, started to intersect with my understanding of the relationship between Spain and Australia, describing an intersection between me, my personal creativity, history, sexuality and identity. This determines how both I, and others, see my work. This is the journey that is described in the thesis.

A narrative of my thinking has been developed by adopting the autobiographical device of observation which James Joyce employed in his novel, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Accordingly, and like Stephen Daedalus in the aforementioned novel, I take the position of the observer, observing the observer observing and in the process I create my story of observation, from both within and without practice.
The story is told as a series of layered observations. This parallels Leon van Schaik’s cone, which he first sketched for me in 2002: Layers of circles, each one placed on top of the other, forming a two-dimensional representation of a seemingly isolated discovery; they lead inexorably upwards and slowly diminish in diameter, narrowing the frame of reference as the subject of the research becomes clearer. Each layer contains a distinct (apparently unrelated) sub-set of knowledge but it is not until the pinnacle of the cone is reached, and a stake can be driven down the centre, that each layer can be understood as part of a uniform three dimensional structure. This cone, with its layers of meaning and observation, is a reflection of my research. Uncovering layers upon layers, the research became a journey back into practice, from which the blue room was discovered.

In 2006 the late Cuban-American artist, Felix González Torres appeared as a point of creative and emotional reference, helping to merge the professional with the personal. His work was seen in its various guises, as a visual metaphor of my relationship (with Spain, my work and on questions of self-identity), not only for the feelings embedded in the work, its minimalism and sensuality, but because he occupied a ‘place’ that was peripheral to both his own culture and adopted country, and to the political currents at the time under which he was operating (the peripheral nature of gay commentary and issues vis a vis HIV AIDS). I liked the way the bite of the political current underlying the work did not detract from the visual and metaphoric beauty of it as art. He also seemed to derive creative energy from this peripheral condition. To do the kind of work that he wanted to do, for example, about gay love and death or about immigrant health and status, it had to be the sub-text. It was about subverting things, telling one story behind another, alluding to things through absence. I was also trying to allude to aspects of the Spain / Australia relationship, and the sense of dislocation brought about by it, in the same ambiguous way. The sense of peripherality that this relationship marks is also a reflection of many other conditions of peripherality that I feel. González Torres used his peripherality (as a cuban exile, gay man, artist) to find a way to operate and move within this; to operate under the radar of censorship but still be highly visible.

There is a parallel to the way I am trying to locate myself now, here, in Sydney. What separates me? How is peripherality formed by the presence of this other, within and around identity, sexuality and culture?

In terms of my own history, the proposition of the research is that: it is in the interface between things, the razor thin space of connection between countries, cultures, between old and new (buildings), between the political and the poetic, that discoveries are made. It’s where the opportunities lie to create something new. It’s also where things are at their most ambiguous and capable of being many things. This forms the spatial and spiritual essence of these connections, albeit in different guises and forms of representation.

This is why I love González Torres’ work; because of the ambiguity. It is capable of layered, multiple readings. The sensory aspect (light, colour, texture) and the commentary on the physical aspect of human occupation is quite often alluded to by absence. For example, the billboard of an unmade bed or his work showing two piles of paper that represent

One point of reference for my shift in thinking, stemmed from observations made by Howard Raggart on the peripheral context of Australian architectural culture. He was interested in the affect that this peripheral condition had on the communication of an idea. As ideas travel they become distorted, re-emerging as something completely different within a changed context. This process of translation from an original source to a modified architectural creation in Australia formed part of a creative experiment for him. In reflecting upon his literal appropriation of different sources, pulled together as collage, it was apparent that this process of translation was unidirectional in that the sources were always travelling inwards from a location outside Australia. Upon arrival and re-assemblage the process became static. I then compared this with my own situation, practising between Spain and Australia, where the influences of particular strategies, responses to site, preoccupations with material and form, as well as the creative frustrations and anxieties of displacement across the intervening space, had shifted between these two places. Ideas and interests had been translated in both directions. Formative discoveries had been made in both places.
the faceless identity conveyed by passports; both convey the sense of something behind something else.

This has resonance in terms of my architecture and in particular those sensory thoughts and occupations which are on my mind when I am designing that are perhaps rarely evident in a photo (like the structure of light, the sense of a light breeze and how this might feel or impact on the work, smell, almost always imagined as though I was being led through a building on my own and only being led by the effect of these things as I felt and saw them); and remembered them from somewhere else. In this, there is also a memory of things and sensations experienced in Spain. This was the case with the Eduardo Torroja Museum in Madrid (Project 03): There was a subterranean corridor that formed part of the new work, but which was located in the old building, at the junction between new and old, and from which you could see into a new cloistered garden; a high lofty space (recalls the memory of my silent wandering in the cloister in La Catedral in Barcelona). When I imagined this space, I thought of myself alone in it; hearing the silence of the building, smelling its coolness, observing the shadows. There is also a political component.

This journey of thought between the personal and the professional, speaks of a relationship between public and private realms. These are constituted by the following elements: ¹

PUBLIC

Law
Language
The particular

(Adj. relating to a single person or thing; Noun. an individual item as contrasted with a universal quality)

PRIVATE

Dreaming, fantasy, desire
Father
Home

¹ This is derived from Felix González Torres, as noted in an article by Kwon, M., 2006. “The Becoming of a Work of Art: FGT and a Possibility of Renewal, a Chance to Share, a Fragile Truce” in Felix González Torres. The Felix González Torres Foundation. Steidl Publishers. New York p312: “The artist often said that the public - the realm of Language, Father, law - contains, regulates, or in the artist’s words, “intercepts”, private experience, the subjective realm of dreaming, fantasy and desire.”
LAYER 1
I ask you to imagine…
A vast tableau of light
Looking up with wonder
Falling down into blue water, burst of bubbles
Surrounded by the form of a plush blue-purple room
Purple
A fire in a grate
A cast iron bath at sundown, fire burning slow and red underneath, leaves and branches of eucalypt trees rustling above
A naked, silent, warm body in bed in the morning
Light through trees
Light through clouds
Pale light
Deep glowing light
Yellow
The nape of a neck
A smiling glance
The smooth surface of half resting hands
A full-blown laugh
Light cast through coloured glass
Smell of leather
Smell of a book
Darkness that you can see
Darkness that you can't see
Painted traffic arrows
Stillness…of trees, sky and ocean
The stillness of solitude
Music reverberating through rooms and corridors
Clouds as seen from the window of a plane
An empty room
An unmade bed
A room with just a few objects
A room that is also not a room
A room that appears to have no boundaries
A look that consoles
Eyes that see
Empathy expressed
Joy revealed
The smell of a rubber plantation
New-ness
Sweet joy of wonder
Joy of silent recognition

Project 05
Layer 3
Peter and Stephen
Bruc 39, Barcelona
The blue room
Papua New Guinea
PLACEMENT

Speaking as Stephen...

Stephen

“Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man”

In the interview that accompanies the DVD of “Eloge de L’Amour” Jean-luc Godard says that the “artistic act is an act of resistance against something”. In the film, the conventional cinematic representation of past and present is reversed; the present is shown in black and white; the past in intense hues of strong and vivid colour.

“I see a landscape that is new to me, buts it’s new to me because I mentally compare it to another landscape, an older one, that I knew.” “Eloge de L’Amour” Jean-luc Godard

Conceptually the thesis is approached by eliciting levels of observation: The first level is the visual inventory of what is seen (by others); the second level embodies the objects that constitute Stephen’s ‘ambiente’ space, which are given significance through the messages (written words or images) contained within them. He wishes to create a space of narrative silence, so that in essence the observer becomes the teller of the story when he / she is able to put the pieces together.

Stephen is the boy in the image (of recent projects); conveying his sense of wonder, anticipation of the mystery in things, his curiosity, his vulnerability.
Stephen HOBART

“Images filtered as if through a skylight: you are sitting in the dark on the floor of a room, possibly under the dining room table, and, from your hiding place, you look at the adults moving about and talking in the kitchen, clearly visible, unaware of this future description of the scene and the tiny presence of an observer.”

Time

Stephen’s history forms a tiny fragment of the colonial experience that constitutes Australian history; the (Australian) colony of Papua New Guinea; the (English) colony of Australia. The colouring of this experience has deeper historical and familial roots in Tasmania; his father’s home; and that of several generations reaching back to white settlement. But his understanding of the cultural superiority engendered by a colonizing power over the colonized, and its impact on his understanding of race and identity, is placed in sharper relief through his memories of Papua New Guinea. Racial difference is sharply defined in Papua New Guinea, a distinction between white and local, a form of politically unacknowledged segregation operates in the places where his family and their friends choose to live, the clubs they belong to, the houses they build, the schools they send their children to. Cultural difference is defined in both places. Sexual and cultural differences become more sharply defined for him in Tasmania because he has (by then) reached an age when the events that surround him start to more acutely influence his way of observing things.

Stephen lives in Hobart for four years: His family in Tasmania since the time of The First Fleet. He has an etching by a convict artist of his great great great grandmother. With his middle name, he bares and maintains her memory and surname; the daughter of Josiah Spode, the youngest of a family famous for the production of fine china, and colonial chief superintendent of *the black book*, a port registry of all the particulars of every convict recorded upon their arrival in Van Diemen’s Land; a meticulous record of birth date, education, occupation, conviction. *The black book* is the record of white arrival.

The oppositions between different influences and structures are disturbed when he reaches Spain. His difference is sometimes less pronounced than his sameness, coming from the geo-political periphery (Australia), neither indigenous nor European but somewhere in between. Leaving Australia and being in Spain, the sense of displacement, and conversely belonging, that is created by moving between the two, which could at some time in the past have been produced by any other country, any other place, becomes particularly defined by a parallel sense of cultural agreement; his discovery of self, of a form of expression; through Spain’s post-fascist awakening and the burgeoning unfolding of personal freedoms in Barcelona. A personal sense of affinity with his self develops. He starts to construct his

own sense of the modern through this process of exchange and placement; picking and mixing the characteristics that fit, discarding the elements that don’t.

Looking back in time and observing his placement in the past, Tasmania’s history, and his history, are best viewed through a notion of mestizaje (miscegnation), a term that is used by Robert Ellis to describe the different but similar characteristics of post-colonial modernity in Latin America. With the cultural disruption of colonizion, the ‘modern’ history of “… Latin America is post modern avant la lettre, since its ‘modern’ history begins, through the process of mestizaje (miscegnation), with a disruption of the fundamental binary oppositions (same / different, metropolitan / peripheral, European / Indigenous) through which modernity is constructed." 2 The formation of Stephen’s history and his reading of modernity, is formed from the same disruption of oppositions and transformed through a process of union and observation, from a situation of voluntary exile.

The (exiled) Catalan writer Juan Goytisolo, sought to describe the displacement and disagreement of exile by describing it as a form of liquid in which people merge; of different chemical densities; solid, liquid, gaseous, “juntos si, pero no revueltos”; together yes, but not mixed. 3 To Stephen this is a representation of Australia in general and Tasmania in particular; a land of exiles; a local brand of troubled and recalcitrant modernity, irresolutely tied to tradition, but confronted with its own new-ness; stunted growth marked by a resistance (to the mix) and; an insistence on parochial difference through similarity (we are similar to the English and this is what makes us different), as a mark of identity, rather than local authenticity (this is where, and what, we are, now, in the present…). Stephen wishes to mix past, present and future; the ambiguity of old that is new and new that is old; of present which is past, of solid that is liquid and darkness that is lightness, of sense that is sensibility, of things outside view being simultaneously present within view.

Stephen’s understanding of a mental and emotional space; changeable because it is sometimes liquid and sometimes solid; which determines and informs his world with uncertainty; yet marks the aspirations that define the metaphysical; that also informs his architectural thinking; is a space into which he invariably falls into and, eventually, out of.

Prehistory


Tasmania: ill-fitting embrace of the modern (equality under law, sharing commonality, human rights, technology, land distribution, construction, style of living, sexuality); not fully reconciled to the unavoidable mix and disruption of colonization (initially between local

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2 Ellis, R.R. 2000. in Reading and Writing the Ambiente: Queer Sexualities in Latino, Latin American, and Spanish Culture. Introduction The University of Wisconsin Press. p5

and foreigner then between settler and ever more recent settler); or the social, sexual and ethnic mixing that it engendered. In holding to and subsequently advertising the continuity of an imposed Anglo tradition; transporting and recreating its styles of building, its social order (hierarchy and privilege), the place has contested the modernizing rupture that is engendered by colonization, arguably an event of singular and un-paralleled modernity; the creation of a new place, a new culture, a new society, a new mix (new-ness). In its newness it sought to create oldness. In this sense it was post-modern avant la lettre, built on a transported history, initially modern in its attempt to adapt, but progressively marking out its foreign (Anglo) difference (to the indigenous) as a reflection of identity, resisting change in spite of naturally determined conditions and possibilities of freedom, like the possibility of a rupture with past social customs, systems of ownership and power. In Australia, this process was not marked by the mixing of race (ethnicity) so much as by class (social) and the categories that redefined it; that led to the residue of a privileged higher class, residing in what becomes an overwhelmingly pervasive and defining middle class. The unresolved disjuncture that this creates (and in light of the benign image that the place is beholden to now) of a society that desires to remain beholden to the class systems and cultural formations from which it has fled, that was ridden with the hypocrisy of state sanctioned violence, greed and dishonesty whilst it asserted its beliefs (religious and cultural) as a force for good; establishes the enduring umbrageous character of place; one that is filled with the presence of unsettled shadows.

A school in Hobart: His place in Tasmania, established a different point of observation; that existed outside an established appraisal of cultural and sexual discourse. Certainty, both personal and creative, was disrupted. The opposition between sameness and difference, ambiguous in it's formation and expression, leads to and operates within the blue room; the creative world of conception and identity. The room is established as a means of escape. The opposition, thus defined, helps to construct the umbrageous, shadowy darkness of the spaces that characterize it in a physical sense in all its forms.

Tasmania: A place of marked divisions with an enduring and anachronistic elite class. Pupil of a private school that began in the mid 19th century, which maintains and promotes the English Public School ideals of sportsmanship and sport upon which it was founded and upon which it hopes to emulate; of resilience and rugged, un-challenged privilege. Stephen is schooled to believe in this honourable heritage. Inside and outside this environment, he is aware of the contradictions and inconsistencies that mark this life. The horrors and depravity of Tasmania's convict heritage, and the self-interest that characterised the gradual de-Aboriginalisation, can only (now) be observed through the perverse and sanitised prism of tourism. With great discomfort he observes the obscene conversion of its barbarous history into spectacle, a history weakened and diminished by attempts to make it more palatable.

4 This term is used by Robert Richmond Ellis in his introduction to Reading and Writing the Ambiente. Ibid. p5. As noted previously, Ellis uses it in the following context; “...others have suggested that Latin America is postmodern avant la lettre, since it's 'modern' history begins, through the process of 'mestizaje' (miscegnation)...” and he writes that it could also be applied to Spain. It is transposed here, by Stephen, to describe Tasmania's history (Australia).
He therefore views its transformation into a place of benign and peaceful harmony with scepticism. A place of historic denial, with an enduring affiliation with a romanticised (English) Arcadian past, a connection that was, and is most certainly now, disingenuous.

Subconscious

(The emergence of the ‘ambiente’ that Stephen will come to call the blue room)

A room appears, a place in the mind, from which all other expressions of personality and space emerge over time. This is the physical time of Stephen’s being and placement in the world. It is blue. The colour forms a metaphysical and psychological representation of the room, from which all other subsequent variations unfold.

The blue room becomes the space of the subconscious, forming itself around the preoccupations of that subconscious at a given time, opening and closing like a kind of diaphanous membrane to embrace its yearnings. Reading Reinaldo Arenas and observing the work of González Torres, it occurs to him that everyone frames and expresses their differences through the personal rendering of this room; Stephen’s is blue, a subjective component, coloured and manufactured from experience and desire. It holds the invisible ‘outside’ of experience that is then translated through a distortion or transmogrification of that experience. Projected into this context, the sensuality of the blue room is founded on the toughness of observation and experience as well as its sweetness.

The room is both a signal and representation of Stephen’s understanding of modernity. It is modern in that it is a both / and space, allowing people to inhabit the opposite emotions and experiences of existence; to mix them into one form, whilst at the same time allowing them to retain their uniqueness and individuality. It encloses and darkens in times of suffering, sadness, trauma and; lightens to the point of iridescence and an almost luminous half-present point of disappearance, when these shadowy emotions dissipate. The opening and closing page of the website portal (www.collierarchitects.com) is an abstraction of the room, eliciting through its transitory-ness an idea of a place, as the screen pulses through the colour spectrum from blue to blue, a graphic fades and re-appears. In Stephen’s subconscious, the essence of darkness in the room is taken from the past. The room is always changing but is consistently the same. As a reflection of the personal work undertaken by Stephen, of which this research constitutes a significant part, in 2008 the shape of another (same and different) room emerges; it leads up from the old; a reflection of its size; it exists silently and motionless as though suspended in an uncertain place above us, that could be in the sky, yet the word seems manifestly inadequate to describe its metaphysical location; located in a space outside time; where the walls and ceiling glow, amber yellow, white light coming behind (is it from the inside or the outside?); it is attached to the other room by a string; which is not stretched taut as if the string is holding force, but it is loose and slack, with big, wide folds.
Parallel meaning is discovered in other histories of creative sublimation, where anger, frustration and restricted expression resides in personal artistry. A thread of sexualized energy and meaning is traced through, in either subtle or explicit tones, and linked to either direct or indirect political suppression. Sexual themes of power, death and love appear; forged into a broader critique on the exiled, the homeless, and the state-less. Sexuality is the dominant factor, firing the anger and desire for an alternative, challenging the status quo, forcing a reassessment of singular and collective experience.

Reinaldo Arenas wrote in his autobiography Before Night Falls, that sexual liberation and exploration across Cuban society, unconfined to men who identified as gay, was at its most energetic and flagrant at the time of greatest repression of homosexuality. Stephen applies his understanding of the blue room to these situations, imagines that for these men, the blue room is a means of escape, and a realm that enabled the translation of repressed desire and momentary joy. As a celebration of who he was sexually, politically and creatively, Arenas’ writing was his blue room.

Taking the notion of an hour glass, sometimes the blue room is tight like the neck of the hour glass and presents itself as the narrowing transition between places or ways of thinking.

Juan Goytisolo: “Revelations of a world of abuse and robbery... outrages hidden behind pious phrases... excess and violence beyond belief.” 5 Goytisolo wrote of the hypocrisy that underwrote the conservative, reactionary forces of Catalan society; the moralizing role of the church; the uncertainty of social unrest and the righteousness of the forces against it; all of which manifested itself in Civil War Spain. With Stephen (as with Juan): A constant feeling of repressed desire embedded in shame and guilt, suspicious of (and at the same time not yet fully conscious or capable of being able to articulate) the iniquities of Tasmanian society. Sensual and emotional indecision; dark forces beneath; disturbing impulses misunderstood, blindly suppressed.

At the age of sixteen he became a silent observer of the things that happened around him, of the privileged groups of society that made up his circle of associates and his parents’ friends, Tasmanian society; conservative and parochial. He also harboured a harsh and ruthless truth that he concealed and protected.

Later

Looked at historically, he is an outsider from a place of outsiders (Tasmania). James Boyce says that the shame of convictism was largely based on the stigma of homosexuality. “The pervading ‘stain’ of convictism arguably had its origins more in shame about sex than in memories of servitude...” 6 Stigma, shame, homosexuality, stain, convictism: the reality of Tasmania.

Goytisolo on Spain, Arenas on Cuba, González-Torres on the United States, Collier on Australia (...): Arenas recounts the institutional criminality, repression, homophobia and violence of Castro’s Cuba: For most of Tasmania’s white settlement history this quartet equally applied. It lies buried beneath a sanitised, bucolic image. A medieval brutality, a self-serving criminality to the ruling classes, marked by gross abuses of power. Boyce describes how the governor, beholden to the landed interests of the Legislative Council and keen to endorse the strategy of murderous removal, ignored the directive of the Colonial Secretary to effect a negotiated settlement with the aboriginal population. Robert Hughes recounts the stories of heads on stakes in central Hobart. 7

Tasmania’s history, with its nexus of conflict between settler, convict and aboriginal, its brutal history of repression and racial murder, its vilified history of same-sex relationships, is a territory filled with ambiguity. An ambiguity that is allowed no context in which to express itself and which is continually challenged. This is cast into contemporary light by cultural myopia. Confusing nationalism with identity, former Prime Minister John Winston Howard asserted that ambiguity undermines identity: “Our sense of national pride is stronger now than it was in the 1990s, less ambiguous, and that is tremendously important”. 8

The telescopic unfolding and containment of identity moves between the personal, the architectural, the Australian-ness of identity. All of this makes the fabric and essence of the blue room. Stephen compares the sparseness, moral rigidity and lack of sensuality within the Anglo-colonial experience, and the means with which its actual horror and violence is avoided within contemporary readings of place, with an observation of the sensuality of Spain and the Spanish-influenced cultures of Latin America. Neither the Spanish-colonial nor the Anglo-colonial history of socio-cultural miscegnation describe finite stories of cultural affiliation or displacement; González Torres and Arenas exiled in the United States of America, Goytisolo in France (and later in Morocco); Collier drawn to Spain. What is interesting is how this history is absorbed and expressed within creative output, how horror is observed, catalogued and articulated as part of contemporary experience. With Stephen, the conflict found a different kind of expression, produced different manifestations of identity.

Sexuality and gay sexuality in Latin cultures differs from the Anglo in the sense that it is more flexible and resistant to categorization. The way gay sexuality has integrated itself into straight culture is therefore more ambiguous. Queer culture in the Latin-American sphere has not been accompanied, as vigorously as Anglo culture, by the political and to some degree self-imposed push towards segregation. Reinaldo Arenas’ memoir recalls the disillusionment of exile in North America in terms of its lack of sensuality as a culture; how

8 Howard, J.W. excerpt from a speech delivered at Harvard University in 2008, as reported in the Sydney Morning Herald, 11th March 2008
9 This is understood not so much in the sense of the finished work (what might be understood as the output) but in the search for a space in which to express a creative impulse; which can also be expressed as a sense of momentum borne of an insatiable curiosity for things and (new) experience.
the political assertion of gay rights (the forging of self-identity) has led to the creation of gay groupings and the tendency to read things in black and white, which has in turn leached all forms of sexuality of its life and blood. He pined for gay life in Cuba, which he described as more interesting and certainly more exciting within the ambiguity of mixed association, repression; driven and marked by shifting boundaries and patterns.

Part of this revolves around the conception of gay identity in Latin culture, which is described by the term ‘ambiente’. Individual identity, though marked by private considerations and sexuality, can only exist and be experienced within the shared commonality of a collective that is not exclusively shaped by sexuality. The formation of this community arises from and is enriched by associations across a broad social space and the fluidity of association between them. This is alluded to in the introduction to the book, Reading and Writing the Ambiente: Queer Sexualities in Latino, Latin American, and Spanish Culture: “...Anglo-American conceptions of sex and gender derive largely from an ontology of individual identity, (whereas) the ambiente is a common space arising through a reciprocity of praxes. Although in the Anglo-American setting the mutual recognition of lesbian and gay sexuality can lead to the constitution of a community, one is, strictly speaking, lesbian or gay regardless of whether one is positioned inside the closet or out. The ambiente in contrast, can be experienced only collectively, even if this collectivity is initially private.”

10 Ellis, R.R. Reading and Writing the Ambiente: Queer Sexualities in Latino, Latin American, and Spanish Culture. The University of Wisconsin Press. p4. Note: The text in bold font is highlighted by Stephen. Ellis also notes that: “Reading the ‘ambiente’ is...less an act of ‘outing’ than of ‘joining’ in a process of generating a social space and infusing it with a sexuality of inclusiveness.”
LAYER 2
Sensibility

Sensibility is the art; the sense is the process of turning thought into action (the science of the art). The sensibility takes things apart; the sense puts them back together.

Words: Depression. Trauma. From this springs the private sensibility; anguished joy. Dreaming, imagination, fantasy, desire, home, father. Observing the outer world from this perspective. Troubled mind. Can’t think. Can’t project one-self. Silent contemplation. Urged on by the need to express, to engage, to continue. Days, of questioning, approaching a kind of madness akin to losing control, a free-wheeling journey of despair, or an affliction affecting movement; need to hide, need to find protection, do not want to be on display, desire the feel of velvet, desire the feel of an upholstered and beautiful softness, something contained, shadowy, smell of perfume impregnated into (tailored) clothing (Barcelona), sounds muted by fabric, inner sanctum of rooms away from prying eyes, the protective gaze of the cinematic voyeur observing other people observing him. Days of wondering, observing his point of inactive observation. Stillness. Immobility. The search for a means to express; to uncover the idea that has yet to be realized, that simply exists in his mind; in limbo; dormant, initiated by a thought or a memory or a sensation of something, the troubling presence of an ill-defined but threatening person; triggering the previously hinted at thought of danger, subterfuge, deceit, hurt. A desire to take flight, to run and hide, inability to articulate his thoughts, yet his feelings make their presence felt in loud internal monologues of anger and despair; the noise is lessened when his thoughts allow him to visit other places, when he allows other people to step in to his mind and occupy the places of intimate solitude and remorse; or to lead him out of the room that is coloured with those memories and sensations and smells.
Project 01

A coil
Painted rock
A foothold
Carved surfaces and spaces of the ground
Blue-black ocean
Green ocean
Scrappy bark and foliage of coastal trees
Orange-coloured rock
Black dog bites my mother’s hand
Death and depression surrounds
Where?
In my mind?
A house of glass (client)
Break!
A house of walled enclosures and directed views (me)
A house in and of the ground (me)
Not me (client)
Break!
A house off the ground (client)
12 year old
Damien, the omen
Specific references to other architects, mine, hers
Was I wrong, did I not listen
Failure of duty?
But
The cold ocean winds?
Tasmanian winter
Steepness of site
Rocks
A place of warmth, light, shelter
A piece of Spain transported to Tasmania
2 bedrooms below, part of the ground, dug out, steps lead down, close to the trees and cliffs beyond
In the living room, beside the fire looking out at the ocean
The dining room, a room of northern sunlight opens onto a deck on one side, you can look above the canopy of the trees, a terrace behind
The kitchen above, a place of observation, in the centre
3 floor plans
and a series of spaces that remain locked in my mind
The project triggers his interest in the idea of doing the PhD research, without being sure why or what it was that he was searching for: A project borne of creative frustration and the failure to communicate his reasons, intentions, desires, beliefs. A project initiated and executed under the stress of a deep and unassailable state of sadness, the stress of financial uncertainty within practice; commenced with the promise to be significant in scope and ambition but with unrealistic expectations of cost.

Stephen was searching for a way to overcome the bleakness and torments of the place in which he found himself, to derive an idea that could root itself in the landscape, to burrow, to disappear and yet assert itself, a form that through its spatial sequence could suggest a connection with the inward looking, masonry houses of that faraway place in Spain (the home of his immediate past) and the specific grounded conditions of the Tasmanian coast; a house that would single out certain views for particular appreciation rather than offer a glazed panorama of undiscriminating attention. In his mind, the house evolved from the imagery of a Mediterranean landscape of white walled, ground-hugging houses, sitting with apparent ease, directly inserted within an uninterrupted landscape of rocks and trees. The mental place from which the project evolved, coloured the form and shape of the solution and led to its ultimate rejection. He was unable to sell the idea. In his own mind, he repudiated the brief to create a four-sided glass box. To him; it was too obvious and lazy a solution, without nuance or surprise; but to her, the client, an abnegation of his responsibility; to him, a creative disappointment that it didn’t happen.

Stephen

BARCELONA

“Ever since the Romans named Iberia’s western reaches “Extremadura”- the extreme territories- it has lain on the margins of Europe’s consciousness, always the site of difference, always ‘queer’ Iberia. Here it is that the Romans located the ‘nec plus ultra’ beyond which there was nothingness, or worse, every conceivable monster of the imagination.”

L3
Top floor (under one faceted roof) with the kitchen-in-the-middle; the top (inside and outside) room in a descending coil of interconnected and yet separate rooms
Top and mid-level floors form one high living space overlooking the ocean; the rear excavated wall directs movement around a central hearth and up to the top level.

Lower level floor with main bedroom; the first suite of rooms in a coil of movement.
LAYER 3
"Fleeing as I was from a world where I felt alien and marginal, I was unconsciously afraid of being interned in another where these feelings of difference and disagreement could be reproduced."  

The notion of marginality to which Felix González Torres adhered had everything to do with the things that set him apart. For Stephen, asking the question: How could these things be exploited and what form could they take? What about the sacrifices that he has to make in the process; can these also be seen as creative? Does it have something to do with the way this is worked and shaped within a system of constraints?

When Stephen worked for Manuel de Solá-Morales, an often ambiguous process when many things were left unsaid or made opaque by uncertainty and confusion, and conscious of his need to 'control' the process, he would look for the gaps between what Solá-Morales said he wanted and what was required as a way to present an idea of his own. Like a kind of slow moving viscous liquid filling, taking shape, distorting, flattening, success was based on how well it filled the gap, and adhered to the two sides of the frame.

Memory: The office occupied the ground floor of a 19th century villa. The walls and ceilings are painted apricot, the floors laid over in cork. Four rooms at the rear open onto a long porch and a garden of gravelled earth and palm trees. Broken tiles on the porch, wrought iron posts, Catalan vaulted ceilings. Customwood tables covered in large sheets of stiff white paper wrapped over the edges and fastened with staples, yellowed and grayed with lead smudges; parallel rules and set squares, rustic timber chairs with seats of woven rattan, uncomfortable and unstable, a solitary stool, a big metal cabinet with folding drawers of staples, rulers, tape; a single phone and fax machine in a separate room; architects seated in quiet concentration or gathered silently round the thinking figure of Solá-Morales, waiting, listening, ready to respond and engage with critical insight; a private room at the front lined on all fours sides with glass fronted bookcases, (Solá-Morales') extensive collection of books and journals carefully chronicled, a meeting room surrounded with framed etchings of city plans from the ancient and modern.

In Australia now, Stephen positions himself in a public realm, which asserts itself as a place for unmarked identities: white, (male), 'normal', middle class, heterosexual. Marked by his remoteness, the gaps in experience of who he is and who he wished to be, open up and reveal themselves for what they are and the points of difference become more acute. Forming edges on the outside, these gaps are defined by the limits of what is accepted (dogma) as a kind of conformity (which is about closing the gap) and on the inside, by the places which he chooses to inhabit and mark out as his own. His non-conformity was

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marked by staking out a personal ground that was, in the first instance at least, marked by escape and fear but which has since been transformed (over time) into something new; a form of freedom that embraces his own sense of difference and allows him to explore and feel with uninhibited curiosity.

Points of Sameness and Difference: Stephen’s peripherality stems from the politics of sexuality: beginning with a fear of discovery, of humiliation, the need for protection, the reluctance to conform to (stereo) type, protest at the strictures and dogma of heterosexual morality, simplistic conceptions of our role and objectives in life as men, defined and projected by a self-serving middle-class, conservative agenda at school, later discovered in reverse in the homosexual community, a similar invocation to conform, to be a functioning and faithful part of a sub-culture; staid, boring and equally oppressive, a desire to operate outside this, for personal freedom and liberation to act and think as he wishes, to engage as he wishes, to be stimulated by difference. The homosexual sub-text leads to a way of engaging, distancing and moving beyond relationships (professional and personal), things that are concealed, left ambiguous, not disclosed. This encourages a kind of internal exploration of ideas. A parallel forms with the way he works that for him is a silent process; he enters an imaginary world of his own and moves within an introverted world of ideas and so the work is introverted. It often looks for ways to enclose in upon itself.

But he does not wish to align himself with the minority or take a sexualised political critique of de-stabilising it. It is not revolutionary in this regard. Any violence associated with the position that he takes is directed inwards. He is more interested in questioning the predictable. In this, he marks out a peripheral territory of his own.

Later, Stephen will come to realise that the peripheral nature of design in mainstream culture requires that aesthetics and beauty be contingent upon economic and political factors and that they need to be concealed beneath the more practical agenda of delivery.

He is also peripheral to the place and thing for which he feels so close, Spain, and this is brought about by distance and culture. Spanish architecture gained a certain freedom from the strictures of modern (CIAM) architectural dogma by being peripheral to it. Peripherality allowed architects to choose what they wished to exploit from it. Architects could align themselves with whomever they wished (creatively speaking) as long as they could find a space in-between the political constraints of fascism. The system provided fertile ground for the development of two of his favourite works of post war 20th century architecture (Casa Ugalde and Gobierno Civil de Tarragona) by architects who were sympathetic towards the fascist victors of the Civil War. 2

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2 The architects to whom I refer are Alejandro de la Sota (Madrid) and José Antonio Coderch (Barcelona). I do not profess to be an historian of Spanish political history and such is the competitive reality of the architectural commission, I appreciate that it is difficult to determine the basis of someone’s political affiliations simply on their capacity to prosper within a given political system. The assumption that these architects were politically sympathetic towards Franco’s government is gleaned through informal discussions with colleagues and academics in Spain and is based on the fact that they both stayed in Spain (rather than seeking exile elsewhere) and managed to develop a significant body of work throughout the time of Franco’s dictatorship. I note this simply to illustrate the difficult nexus between creativity (as seen in the work that I admire) and a political philosophy that is contrary to my own.
looking is invested with identity: gender, socio-economic status, race sexual orientation.”

Stephen
SYDNEY

"From a certain age, one learns to strip oneself of all that is secondary or incidental in order to bind oneself to the areas of experience which apportion greater pleasure and emotion: writing, sex and love will henceforth be the deepest and most authentic configurations of your territory: all else is a poor substitute that an element principle of purely selfish economy advises you to do without and which you will do without entirely: as you will see from your own example, who ever aspires to become a public figure sacrifices his most intimate truth to an image, an external profile: literary favour is a chance and subtle matter and it usually takes vengeance on those who rush in search of recognition by distancing itself and then abandoning them: from your publishing watchtower you will witness over the years numerous examples of literary and moral erosion: that process of self-advertisement by the writer who, because of unfaithfulness to the most genuine sources of his being, finally loses, unawares, his pristine state of grace.”

Fighting the stifling atmosphere of immobility, he tries to cultivate everything that quietly separates him. Over the course of several years, and the growing of a muted kind of confidence, he even tries to glorify whatever it is (in him) that bothers them. The sense of being marginal creates and solidifies the distance between him and them. He studiously marks out the boundaries in small increments, moving backwards and forwards, with each step measured by calculated desire for proximity and (dis)engagement. The place where he locates himself, whether it be from power, missed opportunity, unfulfilled ecstasy, knowledge, or from a place that has (in the past) been able to fully immerse him in its energy and essence, is a measure of his creativity. It helps him to resist the things that threaten to ossify, stagnate, undermine. It keeps reminding him that he is moving. It helps to locate the darkened corners of experience. He looks to cinema to inspire and describe this darkened world (and because it gives form to the images that populate his head), and is drawn to the visual and descriptive evidence of life, death, longing, the political, in the art of Felix González Torres because it conveys so much of what interests him about the possibilities of creative engagement with his work, the impulses that shadow it, and the things which remain elusive.

Looking for the shadows, umbraceousness (umbra or umbrae), a region of total shadow.

This is a cinematic journey. As in González Torres’ untitled work, he wonders if the architectural work should (and can only) remain unexplained, as part of him wishes that it


1994
Them: His father; his fellow schoolboys; lost friends; other architects whom he studies, works or competes with; and those whom he has worked for; people who control the agencies that employ him.

2007
The idea of umbraceousness is mentioned by Leon van Schaik in email correspondence.
Overleaf

Felix González Torres
“Untitled” (Water), 1995
Plastic beads and metal rod
Dimensions vary with installation
and
“Untitled”, 1989
Paint on wall
Dimensions vary with installation

Right

Felix González Torres
“Untitled”, 1989
Paint on wall
Dimensions vary with installation
Installation view of Felix González Torres at Kunstverein St. Gallen Kunstmuseum, 1997
could (because he resists the need for explanation); leaving the thing to appear as a signal of a name or an idea eternally placed in parenthesis, keeping it ambiguous and forever open to (mis)interpretation by others. But how much can he leave out (or how much of himself can he remove from the frame of vision) before absence turns to banality? It’s the sense in which it is always speaking about something else which draws him to it, which is in itself a form of unfulfilled, certainly unrequited and impossible, love.

Always there is the presence of blue, a particular pale blue, and sometimes a deeper profusion of colour turning into a darker umbraceous region of intensity and camouflage. These things intertwine.

For his self portrait “Untitled”, 1989, a work of metallic silver lettering, Félix González Torres requested before his death the inclusion of a radiant ‘light blue’ ribbon. He imagined “…the blue of bright light and the blue of the heavens to symbolise the presence of something distant and of condensed longings (of love). Yet even the ‘sky blue’ of the heavens holds an inherent ambivalence, which corresponds to his artistic approach. From a physiological viewpoint, this colour in particular is associated with lightness, quietness and suggestive distance. For him it was above all a metaphor for a pleasant memory.”

The late English film director Derek Jarman uses a luminous Yves Klein blue as a meditation on encroaching blindness and approaching death (from AIDS), coming to terms with the disappearance of images from his vision. Like González Torres, dealing with the essential intangibility of the image or art object. It is fleeting and made of memory.

If only he could convey, in architectural terms, the droning blue screen of Jarman or the jigsaw of watery reflection lines in González Torres, and like the effect of the images conveyed in the screen, he wishes to be absorbed by the image of light reflecting through blue, to see what Jarman sees (nothing as it were), to feel what González Torres feels, an experience of intimacy and sensuality (how does he convey joy and sadness in what he does?); like the experience of falling into water, bubbles of oxygen bursting around him; they rise up to the surface in a delicate white coat of froth, you feel them brushing your skin, fading to clear, its blueness, followed by silence, a stillness, everything blurry and coloured, momentary weightlessness, limbs moving freely, uninhibited, looking up at the light reflected on the surface above, rush of air as you return to your world.

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6 Blue. A film by Derek Jarman. 1993. 75 minutes. Artificial Eye
LAYER 4
“If a beautiful memory could have a colour that colour would be light blue.”

“The mind receives a myriad of impressions. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday... Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness.”

Stepping in

The blue room is the inner voice. It is also a temporal space, without permanence.

It operates as a kind of theoretical ‘opening’ between states of thinking or being. A place of private thinking as well as public description (interrogation) and it’s the temporal place that allows translation to occur between these two things. So whilst it is imagined as a room, there is a point of transition where the boundaries of it disappear to encompass the infinite zone of contact between me and others. It is my ‘room’ but other people can be a part of it (even though they may not be aware of it). It is in this way that the notion of private and public intersect. For example, you or a client move into the blue room each time I (try to) describe the work. The parallel notions of ambiguity, the outsider, Spain / Australia, form the fabric of the room, below, above and at the sides. Translations occur through this fabric as the encounter with and filtering of the self. It is a space that reflects sexuality but in this sense and at its core, sexuality is expressed though its sensuality and intimacy. There is an element of extroversion in the way this sensuality is projected to a public audience, (and at one point I ask myself, does this openness make it Latin and perhaps it is this notion of sensuality beyond categorised sexuality that is being translated between Barcelona-Sydney?); it defines the forms of closeness, boundaries (and the lack thereof) of the spaces that he chooses to create. This extroversion also finds its opposite form, of introversion, in the way the architecture makes itself. Thus you arrive at the hour glass where things are capable of being turned around and viewed in reverse.

The blue room provides an essential form of retreat, a place to dwell in the shadows of thought, to translate the visual essence of the un-translatable (the things which remain silent). There is also something unexplained about areas within the blue room: as a place within the psyche where corners disappear into shadowy depths; relating to the darkness of experience. So as something contained within the fabric of this room, hidden and blurred as though it were viewed through water, but ultimately never ‘placed on the table’, this becomes part of the miasma, of colour, darkness and stillness that seeks an outlet in creativity.

This idea of translation can be seen by looking at the room through the Felix González Torres fascination. If Stephen projects his understanding of the blue room onto González Torres’ work and views it in this way, it is seen as a form of (silent) translation. The room becomes the vehicle for this translation from the private (grief, anger) into the public. All of the things and / or frustrations that marked him as an outsider, but particularly his sexuality and HIV status, make this means of translation absolutely critical; in that things that are difficult to say or articulate in words can only be marshalled in this way. It’s also curious to note that the work is based on the marking of rooms; the sweet works fill a room, the billboard bed is also a room, so in this sense he takes the metaphysical understanding that is embodied by the blue room into the architectural. There is an invisible yet implicit story happening around the bed in the room, in the next room, in the world outside the room. This story beyond the story is what constitutes the blue room. There are things ‘inside’ the blue room and there are those that exist ‘outside’ the room. Although the inside and the outside are essentially one and the same thing; both separate and connected. It is in this sense that the blue room is both public and private.

This is also evident in the painting Las Meninas and Mark Robbins’ book Households. We rarely get to see who our clients are. We ask intimate questions and we observe them from a distance. But they are always positioned outside the work. This also affects the privacy of the spaces. I suggest an idea to a client that has no physical presence except the words that I use to describe it. It will have a form or a feeling embedded within it, in a private language of my own, but it is just as likely to take shape as something different in the eyes of the client. In an example from Robbins’ book, we see a photograph of an empty living room. Beside this we see the people who occupy this room. Our eyes shift between the details of the person to the details of the interior, between the house proud and the body proud, wondering at the points of connection and dissonance. We try to relate a face, a pose, with the room that we see and make up our own stories about the convergence between the two. Why the leaves, why is one of the men touching himself? To neutralise each place, he frames his views of the rooms from a fixed point of observation.

This forms the key to Stephen’s understanding of translation. Translating sensations and states of thought, from the innate inner structure of one language to another. Concealed behind the obvious differences of symbols and grammar, history, olive skin to pale-white skin, culture and geography.

If the way to approach the work is to consider this framework of what is visible in the frame, what is invisible (and happening around it with for example, absent clients, observers), what is next to it but in close proximity and what is happening in the world outside it; how do I draw out the relevant elements and describe them without being explicit about them? Is it by forming certain levels or strata of observation? (It is) About: sexuality (through all phases of life), abuse and place.

When he enters and touches upon the creative genesis of a work, he is in some way touching upon memory and the spatial need that it engenders at a given time. So the project becomes a way of silently translating this but converting it at the same time.
The difficulty with this telescopic approach is that there is nothing to suggest what lies behind it. With Robbins' households, the photos of the occupants are essential components of the story. This allows connections to be made by the observer. It suggests that I need to incorporate evidence of this with images of the personal (even if it is not possible to have actual photos of the clients), statements, elements that suggest the essence of contact and the stories that sit beside that. Are these my stories as the artist or the stories of the client?

Stepping out

The blue room

In a spatial sense, the blue room makes its appearance felt in different ways: In the bathroom-in-a-living room house (Project 02), at inception (fixing upon the idea; forward reflection), during evolution (translation of idea into material detail), at the conflict of rupture at its conclusion (reflecting back with sadness on where things went wrong and how communication broke down between the client and architect); in the Madrid competition (Project 03) at the moments of calibrated collaboration (when an idea fit), the room within the scheme where my mind wanders and dwells whenever I think of it (a long, high, dusky darkish blue tinged space at the transition between the old and new parts looking out into a cloistered garden). In the yet to be completed inverted house (Project 09), the blue room has yet to form itself within the scheme, although it hovers within the mood and texture of a room in the original house, and has suggested itself in a different solution to resolve the transition between old and new, which the clients rejected. But it is this transitory nature of the blue room that is a mark of its beauty and intimacy in that it can't be pinned down and held in space because it is based on different realities of observation.

The blue room exists where there is a ‘common’ space; a kind of collective ‘ambient’ space marking the literal translation of this Spanish / Latin term of gay identity: the ambiente.
LAYER 5
VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE

“If the mind is a machine, then the self is its ghost. It is what cannot be seen.” ¹

Stephen locates himself in the third person; to take himself out of the process whilst remaining in it. To help him to be objective about the subjective. He becomes a voyeur; of himself, but he is looking at himself doing the looking: trying to find a way to glide through the image of his own making. This image becomes a kind of veil between him and the idea; a filter between the invisible world of imagination and the visible. It is formed in the space that separates memories and longing.

The painting Las Meninas explores the invisible and visible world of observation and representation. The painter Diego Velázquez represents himself in the act of painting, on an invisible canvas, two figures whom the Infanta Margarita has come to watch, along with an entourage of maids of honour, courtiers and dwarfs. There is an invisible hidden space outside the figures represented on the canvas. The subject in the form of King Philip V and his wife are not visible, at least directly; we see their reflection in a mirror that hangs in the comparative darkness at the far end of the room. No one is paying any attention to this image. We the spectators share this vantage point (is it us or is it them that the painter’s gaze rests on or is it both them and us?) Like them, we observe ourselves being observed. The results of the painter’s gaze remains concealed from us. From the right, an invisible window produces a light that makes visible both us as the spectator and the figures that are represented in the painting (the room as well as the canvas). Velázquez has chosen to place himself in the painting whereas his royal patron is outside the frame (a creatively deft, if politically risky, move).

Stephen will encounter this dilemma with his clients.

The painting presents us with a cycle of representation that forms a spiral from the position above the observer (in the painting) to the observed. ² This cycle is constantly moving between the observers observing the observed, and the observed observing the observers. It is infinite, and the painter has made it so by concealing from view the canvas that he is painting.

Unlike the artist, the architect places himself within the work of architecture but this is not apprehended in reality; he remains outside the frame. But he is the one who controls the colour of the light and shadow, the composition, the field of depth, the accents and folds, the degree to which the observer can interact and be observed. He does this for the client. The client observes the unfolding story of their project through the eyes and mind of the architect without ever truly apprehending the reality of the project until it is complete. The architect is constantly trying to find ways to make the invisible work visible.

Was Velaquez the first of the ‘magic realists’?  

Do magic realists circumvent reality to make beauty out of the banal, out of loss and violence, out of dangerous political territory? There is a sense in which the blue room operates in the same vein. In this sense, it's also clear that another reason for his fascination with Felix González Torres is the intimacy of the work; that he allows people to get so close.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres: From ‘behind my eyes’. Behind his eyes there are places that will always remain invisible. Stephen's life in Spain was a search for creative and personal (sexual) visibility through the invisibility of in-between-ness (exile) in a place that wasn’t his own but that allowed him to connect with people and experiences and sensations.

In the past, Spain allowed him to come close to whom he wanted to be and what he wanted to do creatively. It was everything that he wasn’t. Spain: everything externalised after the closed-ness of the United Kingdom (and opaque-ness of contact in Australia), where people were almost afraid to reveal themselves, concealed emotion; life enclosed emotionally and physically (in an internalised culture); a measure of a climatic imperative in Finland, of living inside. Spain: life on the streets, noisy, drums being banged, local bands of community musicians on festival days creating noise, attractions in the street, people visible, making themselves visible in ‘el paseo’, to see and be seen; affects the way they dress, their aesthetic. This imparts a kind of sensuality, embodied by colour, noise and laughter, all the signs of people wanting to make themselves heard, felt, visualised; something which resonated for him in a state of concealed sexuality and emotional reserve seeking release, a connection, the colour of living. But then there was always a point at which he fell back into himself and he moved away from it.

In the past, he adopted techniques of engagement with work and client that forewent disclosure. Things remained out of view. Much was left unsaid: intent, feeling, impulse, softness, vulnerability, toughness, anger and thwarted frustration. Each of these things found an outlet in the execution of the independent idea, the competition process, the precision and execution of a drawing, embedded within it; left silent and mute within the two dimensionality of the image: to occasionally come alive with the force of verbal description.

When he returned from Spain and took a position at City of Sydney Council, this shifted.

The idea of operating under the radar was his *modus operandi* at Council. But he was invisible behind the process and creative visibility is important. At council, he realised that no one cared about design really, it was a means to an end; they only cared if it was built on time and to budget and satisfied the brief. Design could only ever be another layer, another story, located behind the political, the programmatic and the financial, and observed only by those who wished to observe. He grew very conscious of this paradigm in his work, of the fact that he would rarely win arguments on aesthetic terms alone. And so he avoided...

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3 Richard Blythe made this rhetorical observation about Velaquez at the 2007 October Graduate Research Conference, RMIT University.
trying to win arguments based on the merits of a design and engaged architects who he knew would be capable of doing this. It was all about satisfying a political objective through the shape of the idea and engaging the political with the creative.

This is when Stephen removes himself from his own blue room and becomes a maker of other peoples’ rooms.

Both at Council and beyond, as he re-launches into private practice, the meaning and potency of that other life in Spain remains secluded within the confines of his memory and being. Is he far from it or close to it? It can be discussed, alluded to, the multiplicity of his experience can be disassembled and tabled in defence of an idea, a practice, a way of looking and thinking, but the real substance of his affinity has an element of privacy, involving a search for identity and sexuality, that can never be fully re-contextualised for a public audience and especially within the physical properties of a world that is constructed for the private enjoyment of others (the client, designers, politicians, etc...). But it undeniably informs the presence of an idea, an urge, an intuition, and the joy and sorrow that is present within that conflation of memory shadows the work that he does.

He draws upon elements that serve the moment.

It shadows the forms and placement of rooms in projects 01 and 09, between the darkness of the old and the light of the new (09 and 03). Its presence is felt in the search for an idea, that becomes real in the grounding and burrowing of space (projects 01 and 03). It is reflected in the exploration of colour and luminosity (project 02). It rests behind the friction and disagreement that concludes one client relationship (project 02).

If we observe this billboard by Felix González Torres, all we see is an unmade bed. I wonder at its suggestion of closeness and warmth. I observe the folds of the sheets. Is this the bed that he shared with his lover? The shared intimacy is both beautiful and generous.

This transaction between the personal and the private is also a reflection of the space between a client and myself.

I create an idea from memory using a repertory of stored images and sensations. I decide which things are to be revealed, remain invisible, allusive, barely there or completely concealed beyond recognition.

2005
Stephen Collier Architects Pty Ltd is established
LAYER 6
PARADOX

Engaging with the political is central to the evolution of the architectural work, because so much of it (all of it?) is about delivery, packaging a message that has grip with a client; who is often a client within a client, representing multiple threads of opinion, fear and conservatism, often ignorant and suspicious of the intellectual, working unconsciously towards the weakening of an idea.

González Torres was inclined to note his “exclusion from the circle of power where social and cultural values are elaborated, and to affirm his rejection of the imposed and established order”. 1 This is what Stephen feels. And yet as with González Torres he doesn’t want to exist on the margins. As González Torres noted; “for me, it makes a lot of sense to be part of the market. It would be very expected, very logical and very normal and natural for me to be in an alternative space” (in relation to his Cuban-American / gay identity perhaps). But it’s more threatening that people like me are operating as part of the market.” 2

He achieves this by masking the idea behind the visual reality of the work. There is always the shadow or presence of something else behind it. But it is based on an acceptance of his marginality. Indeed, he exploits it for its creative potential. On the one hand this is private (he made all his work for his dead lover) but it is also public (the billboard of the unmade bed). If we observe this from an unknowing distance, all we see is an unmade bed. Both the artist and his intent is absent; encapsulated in the idea that ‘I make it for me, but it’s not for me’. Stephen is intrigued by the challenging nature of this paradox. It closely resembles the architectural commission. There is a space in between him and the client, that is constantly being negotiated and narratives (both his and theirs) are being built up around the design.

It is amorphous, ambiguous, changeable, open to (mis)interpretation. As an architect, and from conception to completion, he works with that which is invisible, at making things visible, but only in parts and only when he is given the opportunity by someone else. Out of a repertory of images and sensations, he decides what should remain invisible, elusive, beyond the grasp, barely there or completely concealed beyond recognition.

If he observes the room (of González Torres’) with the pale blue almost diaphanous curtains and luminous light, he detects a faint breeze gently shifting the fabric, notes the way that this sits in contrast to the roughness of the floor. He observes that the room is empty and un-occupied but at the same time it suggests occupation: he can see himself moving in the space, standing in the corners, placing a chair in it, contemplating the almost imperceptible sound of the curtains brushing the floor; and so, he tries to find way to embody these silent elements in his work. How much of this is capable of being visualised and conveyed to a client? How can these things be conveyed? The surface texture and feel of the timber floor

2 Ibid., interview by Tim Rollins. p20
should remain. It should show its marks. But the client wants it coated and mark-free.

The key thing that marks the difference between González Torres’ placement and interaction with his art and that of the architect and a work of architecture, especially within the politicised realm of sexual activism, is distance. The architect is rarely afforded the luxury of placing himself at a distance from the works that he produces, at least not until the end and only then if he has no interest embedded in the possibility of referral; from this client to possible future clients.

The other difference is being gay, and the socio-cultural distinctions imparted by nationality, and being gay with AIDS: the presence of illness, loss and the memory of death.

Stephen is not HIV positive, his friend has not died. Architecture gives him the opportunity for a voice. He needs an audience, a public, outside of himself and the realm of his own thoughts to become responsible for it and to activate it. But who is his public? Can it ever be more than one person, engaged with the act of creation at a given moment?

His practice depends upon the survival of a cultural economy that he distrusts, often holds in disdain and yet simultaneously embraces every time he accepts a commission. González Torres talks about this process in the production of his art. Each project is a tussle between finding a way to work with this and at the same time to undermine the aesthetic and cultural values (marked by questions of subjective taste and antagonism, distrust of the creative impulse behind design) that underpin it. This paradox is central. It is an imperfect system. The work is contingent upon acceptance of the inescapable volatility and instability of creative practice. Things can go wrong at any time; relationships sour. What if he can embrace this contingency?

As González Torres stated in conversation: At this point I do not want to be outside the structure of power, I do not want to be the opposition, the alternative. Alternative to what? To power? No. I want to have power. It is effective in terms of change. I want to be like a virus that belongs to the institution. All the ideological apparatuses are, in other words replicating themselves, because that’s the way the culture works. So if I function as a virus, an impostor, an infiltrator, I will always replicate myself together with those institutions. And I think that maybe I’m embracing those institutions which before I would have rejected. Money and capitalism are powers that are here to stay, at least for the moment. It’s within those structures that change can and will take place. My embrace is a strategy related to my initial rejection.”

LAYER 7
PARALLEL STORIES

“Inside becomes Outside”

“We emerge from our own fleeting interpretations of the world. Whenever we sense something, we naturally invent a subject for our sensation, a perceiver for our perception. The self is simply this subject; it is the story we tell ourselves about our experiences.” 1

“The photograph is a thin slice of space as well as time. In a world ruled by photographic images, all borders (framing) seem arbitrary. Anything can be separated, can be made discontinuous, from anything else; all that is necessary is to frame the subject differently.” 2

“A forgetfulness thicker than the one that covered other moments of your past had justly shrouded over that (other) period of your life. The only visible proof, the photographs, the only thing that had survived.” 3

Between the present and the past, figure and ground, the touchable and the untouchable, there is a space, a thin gap. The gap is formed of two opposites; it is not static or closed but changing; the sides can be jagged, abrasive, brooding or light filled, bright, silky, watery; a membrane; a slither of space that connects one side from the other. The slices shape themselves to the form and moment of thought; brought about by the convergence of memory and desire on the one hand, and the cutting through (apprehending) of reality on the other.

This forms a story. For him, there is a story behind every work; but rarely is that the same story that the client sees. It is the presence of the idea in the physical work.

Perhaps what he finds interesting, are the stories that he constructs in his mind that lead to an idea, which will in all probability remain invisible to all but him. These are the things (feelings, emotions, textures, colours) that he uses to make it real. He searches for ways to make these things visible. But he looks for ways to turn down and conceal the degree of visibility of an idea so that it is only implied, for example, a pattern of movement, the changing colour and shape giving potential of cast light, the mood and substance of something old, against the crispness of something new. It describes a movement between the visible and the invisible.

He carries ideas in his head of the kind of spaces that he would like to be given the chance to create: he would like to make a luxurious room of the deepest blue, with the faint glow of light, a muted and subdued space and yet rich with colour and woven texture: a kind of space that absorbs him: a silent place from which to retreat and observe. González Torres’ work inspires a similar desire to enter the frame, turn it into a room, a space, to capture the emotion. Where do these come from?

The blue room is a metaphor for where he would like to be in Australia now and in the future. The blue room is a metaphor of longing. The blue room is introverted; a room of shadows and from these shadows come the essence of ideas, shaped from experience. The desire to create this room is what keeps him looking towards the future because it holds the promise of something that has yet to be realised. As an architect he often dwells in a space of longing; the longing of things that have eluded him, the desire for the next interesting project, the thing out of reach which he can’t seem to grasp or hold. The blue room shifts the focus to the foreground and blurs the distance. The blue room absorbs and stimulates the intuitive instincts.

From what part of him does the work originate? From places that he has seen and experienced: of rooms in which he has slept (his bedroom in Barcelona), the thresholds between rooms in his apartment in Barcelona (Bruc 39), of rooms that he has inhabited both in times of solitude and with the shared warmth of friends, of shops that are small and intimate and concealed discretely from view (the clothing shop, Groc, in Barcelona), of lovers, of bars where he has connected with others (the Gimlet in Barcelona); of movies that he has seen, the scenes and colours that have stayed in his mind as well as the poetry and simplicity of the stories themselves.

Every project is a balance between the personal (internal) and the impersonal (external); what is internalised and what is externalised. This also constitutes the movement between client and architect. This is often a source of friction and misunderstanding, as meanings become lost or fail to get articulated or heard. In the finished work, everyone takes what they will from it; he realises that everyone will develop their own narrative to describe what they like and don’t like. This acts as a kind of release.

He imagines people experiencing his buildings as he conceives them: silently moving through the space marked by voids, being drawn towards light, seeking refuge in shadow and corner, simple pleasure from alternately being able to feel cold and warmth and to see colour. There is a transition between the personal realm of his imagination into the physical space of occupation. But at some level there is an absurdity to the impossibility of this notion. The things that he collects and translates are legible to him in a very specific way: but someone else will experience them in a completely different way. A building has to account for the ambiguity that this process of conception and realisation entails: the possibility that it can be many things.

With Felix González Torres, a deeply personal idea is being conveyed behind something that is so very public, a billboard for example, (there is something very architectural about
this) and the idea has been ‘positioned’ or articulated in such a way as to be receptive to an audience; an audience that probably has no interest in discovering or knowing what the ‘real’ story is about (gay love, exile, death, grief) but is still quite happy to engage with it at another quite superficial level. At some level this surface level of engagement becomes the work and is a source of its beauty and its ordinariness (the photo of a recently inhabited and unmade bed). González Torres makes no judgement about this. The viewer experiences something intimate and yet remains a stranger to the work (and from one another). Commonality is based not on identification with the art object but from the distance at which it is viewed and from which the real meaning is concealed (the sweet work). In fact he purposefully uses it to literally disassemble the work (the pile of sweets which he invites people to take, thereby slowly eroding the work). This removes the element of fear: will anyone understand what I am trying to do, will it be valued? For the architect these fears have the potential to cripple the creative process.

Stephen finds this so appealing. Why? Because it suggests how he might be creative without the fear that whatever he creates, and the interests that lie behind that, will be protected from critical judgement? Because it allows him to connect but at the same time allows a certain distance? Because it lets him release himself from it and to contradict himself; to relinquish control? Because it gives him the freedom and space to explore the things he is interested in and maybe it diminishes the need for complete control over the execution of a work of architecture. It creates a free zone in which to move.

So in the politicised process of assembly, he lays out ideas like sweets. Each one has a message of a form or a feeling embedded within it, written or visualised in a private language of his own, which if chosen has the capacity to become something. The client takes from this, and in a gradual process of accretion creates the work in its own image. With each step the architect moves further inside the idea.

(“Languages are for him, private, not shared, not aural but visual, the keys to burrowing beneath surfaces, to moving backwards, more inwardly, rather than out into the world”)  

The parallel story is mark of identity, written in code. “¿Entiende?” “(Is he) a friend of Dorothy?” Both expressions refer to a sub-text: a mark of the sexual identity of another. In Spanish it is a word, in English it is a phrase related to a film; the sub-text is queer by association. But both questions define a sub-culture with a question that avoids disclosure; an alternative language with a double meaning. ¿Entiende? Does he ‘understand’, does he understand us? Is he one of us? But also, do you understand my language, my life, my choices? A question of identity that contains other questions within it; a hidden question within another.

And so, in wondering, he thinks of the past and that which lies behind the evocation and embrace of beauty; about the sweet smell of perfume on pale golden, lightly tanned skin,

its smoothness, faintly tinged by the odour of his personality, him, his essence, the look in the eyes, knowing, understanding, wishing, reciprocating, hoping, desiring, mirroring (him / you), his neck, the line of hair at the nape, the smile, dark eyes, compassionate (which he believes he sees), the ego (which Stephen is blind to at first but progressively discovers), the laughter, the flirting. Boy after boy, similar features, similar characteristics, always seeking to sink into his beauty (or is it yours?), to be a part of him, inside him, to feel the touch of the hair on his chest, the smoothness of his skin, the shiver of delight, a response to you and as you hope (vainly) only you, the search for a kind of immersion in the myriad forms of beauty and sensuality and an irritability when it is denied.

Each of these stories holds the presence of another story within it.

("At the first signs of attraction, when the withdrawal of the desired face remains sketchy, when the firmness of the solitary voice is just beginning to stand out against the blur of the murmur, something like a sweet and violent movement intrudes on interiority, drawing it out of itself, turning it around, bringing forth next to it – or rather right behind it – the background figure of a companion who always remains hidden but always makes it patently obvious that he is there; a double that keeps his distance, an accosting resemblance.")

He observes the presence of something else shadowing him and the work. The presence of the other takes shape in the form of a companion figure; a presence speaking of desire. González Torres’ red beaded curtain of blood and the figure behind; the presence of the other; of beauty and visceral loss.

The parallel stories are written in two languages; one in Spanish and in English. Which is the most beautiful? Sometimes singular, sometimes both, but who in his immediate world can appreciate this? And how does he translate and convey the essence of beauty in the other? It remains for him to translate, to mix the words and sentiments, to privately enjoy the Spanish ones, to share the English ones, and in the sharing, to hope that the cadence of the other incomprehensible language, though indiscernible in the words themselves, will be conveyed by the silent presence of its unfathomable beauty. But this beauty lies invisible behind the words. Then there is the other story behind the story; of a silent longing, concealed behind the normative composition of genders. She is him, he is me, you am I. It is all about finding, seeking, feeling. He mixes the languages and (chances are) only he can enjoy the reflection of a memory that each one is able to convey simultaneously and separately.

Felix González Torres
“Untitled” (Revenge), 1991
Light-blue candies individually wrapped in cellophane, endless supply
Overall dimensions vary
Ideal weight: 90kg

and

“Untitled” (Loverboy), 1989
Blue sheer fabric and metal rod
Dimensions vary with installation
Installation view of Felix González Torres: Travelling at The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, 1994

Flor de sol
Flor de río
Sun flower
River flower

Yo  I
¿Eras tú? Tienes el pecho
iluminado y no te he visto.

Was it you? Your breast so blazing
with light I lost sight of you.

She  Ella
Cuántas veces te han rozado
las cintas de mi vestido!
And my dress with its ribbons-
how many times did it brush you?

I  Yo
In your throat I can hear, unopened,
my children's white voices.

Sin abrir, oigo en tu garganta
las blancas voces de mis hijos.

Ella  She
Tus hijos flotan en mis ojos
como diamantes amarillos.
Your children afloat in my eyes
are yellow like diamonds.

Yo  I
¿Eras tú? ¿Por dónde arrastrabas
esas trenzas sin fin, amor mío?
Was it you? Where were you dragging
your unending tresses, my love?

Ella  She
On the moon – are you laughing?
then circling Narcissus’ flower.

En la luna. ¿Te ríes? Entonces,
alrededor de la flor del narciso.

Yo  I
En mi pecho se agita sonámbula
una sierpe de besos antiguos
In my breast a snake that won’t sleep
but quakes with old kisses.
Ella  She
The moments fell open and fastened
their roots in my sighs.
Los instantes abiertos clavaban
sus raíces sobre mis susprios.

Yo  I
Joined by one breeze
face to face, we were strangers!
Enlazados por la misma brisa
frente a frente no nos conocimos!

Ella  She
El ramaje se espesa, vete pronto.
Ninguno de los dos hemos nacido!
The branches are burgeoning, go from me!
Neither of us has been born.

Sun flower Flor de sol.
River flower. Flor de río. 6
LAYER 8
IN-BETWEEN-NESS

He exists in a state of in-between. Trying to take from each place, each state, the things that sustain and help him to grow. In-between-ness is a state felt and experienced through forms of sexuality. Is there a spatial paradigm to this?

“The idea of a ‘gay’ place – the place I and so many others had fantasized about, immigrated to – was not also structured around a series of irreconcilable conflicts, was not something founded on a paradox as odd as the one that locates the pleasure of things in the losing of them. What else do you call a place that must somehow be both an edge and a centre, somewhere you could simultaneously feel utterly different, as you knew you were, yet wholly normal, as you wanted to be?...This place would be a paradox.” ¹

It is to a kind of internalised space that he goes to, to look for evidence of this place that he seeks for himself. A blue that he can fall into, be immersed by, absorbed into.

Looking at places that he has identified with sexuality, like a sauna, he puts aside the sexualised nature of these environments as places of fantasy, zones of momentary and anonymous intimacy. He is interested in the rituals of entrance and occupation that exist in these places and how this equates to a process of passing from one realm to another; the layers that separate the every day from the intimate. The light is removed. He enters a shadowy world of illusion where words loose their defining value, where it is possible to retreat into the shadows and simply observe. He was attracted to the layers of physical protection (from the outside world) an ante-room leading to another room, leading to a dressing room, leading to other rooms, and a programmatic shedding of inhibition and concealment (as he moves inside and sheds his clothes) in tandem with a closing down of light and space (rooms become smaller and darker) as he makes contact with someone and becomes physically close. This passage of movement is an inverted declaration of openness, liberating and alienating in equal measure. It is a reflection of other layered and yet contradictory associations between things. By removing his clothes and the tacit but unspoken agreement of sexual contact without complication, he seamlessly enters another world, physically close and yet simultaneously faraway.

The place in-between remains out of reach and elusive to his embrace. Its elusiveness is also integral to its capacity to provide sustenance in a visceral and intellectual way. It lies between Spain and Australia and embodies two opposites: the arid, silent, ascetic countryside of Castile, its bare landscape, of poplars and stubble fields, dry stream beds, rocky verges and outcrops, which colour the air with a distinct light, ² a place in which he discovers “the intentional forgetfulness of the defects of a distant homeland”, ³

² Juan Goytisolo makes these observations of Spain in Marks of Identity. Dalkey Archive Press. London. 2007
³ Goytisolo thus describes his sense of detachment from Spain; in the context of this paragraph, Stephen appropriates the same statement to describe his own detachment from Australia
compensated for by the discovery of a new universe of sensations, that in equal measure are tough and bloody, sweet and sensual. In Spain, they arouse the opposing forces of admiration and disdain; and make him grow to repudiate and reject the facts that mark him out as different (even though it is this same place that allowed him to stake out his differences), leading him to rebel against them, sabotaging the thing that he had grown to love (the city, the culture), leading to alienation, and forever looking over one’s shoulder at the colour of the other place that he had left behind. Immersed in a Spanish environment without ever being totally integrated in it, he relocates to this other place (Australia), marked by a different and far more fundamental sense of the arid, and an interior landscape that one rarely ever sees, he overcomes the disillusion and looking back becomes indelibly united to a ‘language’ in which he expressed his first feelings of ‘difference’. Reunited with his own language and culture, exploring the boundaries of sexuality, seeking refuge in the memories of a faraway place, he marks out another source of difference. A hard-edged time of dissonance, caught in-between, restless, unknowing, too much light here, what about the shadows, quiet moments alone interrupted by the cadence of birds in Eucalypt trees. Difference is now marked by a political shift from the right to the left, initiated by memory and observations of hardship, suffering and poverty, of the marginalised and disadvantaged in that other place; and an intellectual dissatisfaction with intolerance and denial. First stirring of understanding about what sets him apart.

Australia: “so different from the vociferous and chaotic Spanish crowds... (the) errant Spain... vagabond Spain... the boorish people, the bullfight pens and Holy Week processions.”

Australia: the place of qualified equality, unquestioning, mix of people and histories; hardship and suffering buried, concealed, glossed over; the residual and yet inescapable evidence of the customs and postures of the people who made it in their likeness from another faraway place; bleached, salty, forests of blackened Eucalypts, conspicuous assertion of identity through accent, troubling associations of provincial belonging and ownership, people frightened by the unknowing distance (something unmeasurable) and the unavoidable sensation of being separated from the world, oblivious to the brutality of the past, protestant underpinnings to a moral code, irreverent but without intellectual dissent; the incapacity of the place to enfold; angry at inconsistencies and yet wishing that he could move beyond that in order embrace its elusive and contradictory beauty without resorting to the ruling metaphors of landscape. He looks at Australia through a moving veil of images accumulated from Spain, in an attempt to ‘darken’ the experience and to come closer to it. He looks for the recesses and shadows of space.

(The blueness of) Somersault.

In 1996, he returns to that foreign place (Spain), certain that once again, it will become his home.

At a place in time, Spain is a physical representation of this elusive space. The year was

1991. Barcelona fitted itself to him and he to it: the city permitted a kind of silent wandering, fuelled by the peaceful contemplation of things not yet understood, something disquieting, with moments of loneliness and joy, unsettled by coming close to the male image of his dreams; to be left lost and confused, pained, wistful, wishing, searching for beauty in other things outside an obsession, finding a sense of peace in the absent streets in the late afternoon twilight of winter. He starts to see the face of someone else in the future and another chance to find and experience himself; a combination that was sweet in its intimacy of the physical and the emotional. He is drawn towards, as in himself, a kind of beauty in the loneliness of others and their passion; to the marginal, the things that set others apart. This is the place he seeks, filled with an assertiveness that is shadowed by doubt, a place of individuality, that allows connection and absorbs and protects in its sensuality, luxury, beauty, surprise; it is shadowed by other things, colours and feelings, a multi-space that we can carry with ourselves and re-create over and again.

A pattern is established between these places and the feelings that each evoke; of pairings, symbolised by the primacy of this relationship but reflecting other conditions of being; always one thing behind the other.

“We are always two things at once.

You live in the middle voice: living both these places, moving between them, you are here and you are there, you are sometimes the rose and sometimes the rock, sometimes the photograph and sometimes the person, the monument but also the girl, object and subject, a boy and a man, you are sometimes cruel and sometimes wounded, sometimes the beauty and sometimes the loss...”

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Graduate Research Conference 01
May 2003

Paul Carter suggested that the condition of modernity that I was trying to describe had something to do with the irony inherent in all marginalised cultures, which he described as a sense of ‘living behind the veil’.

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AESTHETIC IDEOLOGY

“Some people say aesthetics and politics are different. I say the best thing about aesthetics is that the politics which permeate it are totally invisible. Because, when we speak about aesthetics we are talking about a whole set of rules that were established by somebody... Aesthetics are not about politics; they are politics themselves.”

Stepping out

Crossover occurs at the passing between things; a line of thought that connects one moment or thought from the past into the present, or when the invisible world of memory is evoked in the physical.

With Project 02, he feels that it was the interface between the two parts that should be marked out as a space between and belonging neither to one nor the other: a space that allowed you to realise you were crossing over a threshold between old and new each time you moved from one end of the house to the other. The fact that this in between space was a big open-ended bathroom circumvented the formality of this as an idea and this made the space more interesting for him. And yet this project forms a small fragment in his work. Was he sub-consciously seeking a way to spatially represent this sense of being in between? And if so, what kind of space could it be: a place of beauty, of light and shadow, joyous?

Where does the relationship cross-over?

How does the sensation of being separated connect? What is the form?

From behind my eyes
hermetic song breaks open
song of the seedling that
did not ever flower

Each one dreams about an
unreal, quirky end.
(The wheat dreams it’s got
everous yellow flowers.)

All of them dreaming strange
adventures in the shade.
Fruits hanging out of reach
and domesticated winds.


Project 02
House
Suburban Sydney
For a stylist and antiques dealer
A 9m wide room that spans from one side of the house to the other; a single space at the transition between the old (1880) house and the new; open to the outside at both ends; doors of filtering light; one (bath) room or three separate rooms; with a corridor through the middle; a bathroom in the living room.
None of them know each other,
blind and gone astray,
their perfumes paining them
but cloistered now forever.

Each seed thinks up a genealogical tree
covers the whole sky
with its stalks and roots.

The air’s smeared over with improbable vegetations.
Black and heavy branches.
Cinder-coloured roses.

The moon nearly smothered
with flowers and with branches
fights them off with moonbeams
like an octopus in silver.

From behind my eyes
hermetic song breaks open
song of the seedlings that
did no ever flower. \(^2\)

Creating architecture is an aesthetic exercise. But it is hard to win arguments on aesthetic grounds alone. Especially when dealing with local government. So I invent alternative stories that can convince people purely on the basis of the practical realities. You allow the creative component to recede. The project can be understood as a kind of shadow behind a veil that is revealed with varying degrees of transparency depending on the receptivity of the audience.

Like González Torres, I am interested in finding a way to use aesthetics to describe an ideological position, to affirm the creative role of the architect. To strengthen my position, increase my visibility. Aren’t all architects marginalised by their interest in aesthetics and doesn’t the search for beauty locate him (and me) in a marginal position? Who cares about beauty in an environment dominated by the market? Of the search for (subversive?) beauty; a thing of beauty can hold something else within it and it speaks of the human condition, for example melancholia, anger, sadness, joy, silence, noise, energy, resignation (acceptance). In trying to speak of these things, I am trying to convey the memories of other things that I have experienced.

I am often disturbed by the seemingly frivolous and subjective nature of design (the project takes on substance only when it is photographed) and yet this search for beauty in a material, a detail, a space is also what draws me to it.

In the work of González Torres “beauty is a life force, affirming the presence of intense intimacy, closeness, our capacity to know love, face death and live with ongoing reconciled grief.” He insists that beauty is contained “in the moment of experience, of human interaction, the passion of remembrance that serves as a catalyst urging on the will to create. The art object is merely the mirror, giving a glimpse that is also a shadow of what was once real, present, concrete.”

The moment of ambiguity

a blue that is almost black

Project 02
House
Suburban
Sydney
UNIVERSAL AND PARTICULAR

Stepping out

The blue room of dreaming; encountering the universal through the particular. The particular memory of experience; a particular brief, a particular political imperative to make it happen, a particular creative discourse for how it should be, a particular fear brought about by its location on the marginalised periphery of the city, the particular physical constraints of its structure and size and condition. All these things intercept private experience.

Un-built, undeveloped (beyond the competition design) and unexplained, the project remains in the private realm. The spaces exist only in Stephen’s mind and will continue to occupy this space until they find alternative expression in another rendering of the internal emotive space that existed during its conception. The joy of imagining its sensuality, the sensual story of successive rooms, is sweet and sorrowful. In his own mind he occupies these spaces as a solitary figure and only occasionally does he elicit from his mind a space that is full of people. Although he pictures areas where people might be drawn to most, by a burst of bluish light at the end of a subterranean corridor, the luminosity of a façade that sits above you, an invitation to walk towards it, a circular movement up and around the outside of a garden, light and colour changing incrementally, leading to the sky. The project is an expression of yearning for his remembered perception of another place, a creative exploration of the in-between in a country (Spain) that facilitated his deepest and most personal perception of the in-between in his own nature and desire, an exploration of (his) home: intertwining old with new, tough with gentle, dark with light, cold with warm, confined with cavernous and the ambiguity of the in-between between them; a place for silent wandering and contemplation. This perception is subjective.

Stepping in

Project 03

Language
My language
Place, my place
Here
There
Re-Connect
Yearning
Understanding
Difference
Ideas explored and articulated
No chance to develop
A chance to build, observed and desired
Expectations
Loose imaginings
Belief in oneself

Australia
Spain
Project 03

Site
New and Old

New spatial elements both within and around (outside) the old building

Two internalised rooms (one inside and one outside): a series of stepped platforms leading down to the centre for exhibiting, a new belly of light in the central nave of the old building and a central courtyard garden become the focus of new auditoria and classrooms
Belief in what he is doing
Desire to be there
Imagined spaces
An idea formed in his mind in 3 dimensions – in its spatial light, colour and texture
Explicit rendering in private thought
Visualization suffers
Frustration at incapacity to convince of worth
Clusters of people
Single people walking in silent and darkened spaces at the interface of old and new
Observing from this room in the old, a green garden, leads sensuously up to another place, curiosity
A large central room
Thought about and described in spatial terms
Vocabulary fails him
What words and drawings and forms available to describe
His world within
Wanting to describe this other world outside
Other culture, adopted country

Stepping out

The site of the Eduardo Torroja factory on the south-western periphery of Madrid. A derelict building in a tough neighbourhood, surrounded by warehouses, railyards and high-density subsidised housing. Designed in the 1930s by a well-known Spanish engineer from which it derives its name, one of the first in Spain to explore the potential of reinforced concrete, it consists of three parallel naves, made up of a central space and two side aisles. The brief was to convert it into a technology learning centre and museum.

A collaboration

With the existing building: When Stephen was doing this with his collaborator, they sought to adjust its nature as an extruded space, a ‘tube’ building without enclosed ends. (They) Felt; it important to manipulate the space to give a sense of centred-ness, and to give clues as to how it may be occupied; how it could be exhibited in. (They) Proposed a ‘belly’ to this main space, wherein the centre is dropped, and excavated to four metres below ground level at a central point; this gradually steps up towards the light at both ends. It becomes a space for wandering around and looking across. (They) Felt; that the building could only retain its power by remaining predominantly empty; pare back the existing shell and space. (They) Felt; that exaggerating the breathtaking enormity of the building was the best way to appreciate its strength, its leanness and, the economy of its industrial construction. Interventions were characterised by ‘indentations’ or carvings in the ground plane.

The approach was reduced to two linked strategies: One was to direct and control circulation by setting up two ‘cloister’ zones (one inside, and one adjacent to, the existing building). These are spaces in which people look into a central space, and feed out to other
spaces. The second strategy was to excavate, or carve out the ground, in these central pivotal spaces to make a natural ‘belly’ which is overlooked by the circulation zones. The strategy was not to separate the old and the new, nor have the new bluntly abutting the old, but to have the different elements weaving into each other quite delicately. These two strategies were combined with the introduction of a new material (brick and terracotta) for all new components. (They) Felt; that brick was appropriate as it has a similar industrial humility, but is fundamentally different in the way it is assembled and massed. This gives visitors a clue as to what the original building was and what the interventions are.

One arrives down a ramp from the entry and comes into the main space which is clear from end to end. Single brick-paved steps rise up from the central arrival point, alternately four metres wide, then two metres wide. These dimensions allow each platform to be a useful flat-floored exhibiting space. The side aisle on the ‘cloister’ (eastern) side becomes the principal connecting space, the zone in which the old and the new interface. It is the zone in which one goes into the main space, and also goes out of the old building. The side aisles overlook the central space and gives access to two new precincts; the theatre (tucked in towards the north under the stepped platform) and teaching facilities on the eastern side, the workshop and administration areas on the western side.

Each of these zones are grouped around a subsidiary external space and close in on themselves, providing a secure walled façade to the outside. One can be enclosed for securing staff and service vehicles, the other is (like the main space) partly excavated, and connects the main theatre at basement level, with a series of teaching rooms, grouped around a gently rising ‘cloister’. Each of the two new cloisters have a similar pattern to the treatment of the existing building; there is a central space that is looked into, a peripheral zone in which one perambulates, and more specific functions are accessed from the circulation zone.

His “…self has imposed itself onto reality and created a conscious experience.” ¹ At the end of the process what feelings accompany this when the experience of consciousness, which in the moment of creation is more real to him than reality, disappears? Emptiness. The project became real in to him in its creation. It occupied a process of thought, tangible in the metaphysical properties of sensation within it; light, darkness, cold, warmth, yet outside reality.

Project 03

Existing

Competition for an innovation technology centre in the refurbished shell of a 1930s reinforced concrete building

New

A ramp leads down into the centre of the nave, to a large space that is excavated out with stepped platforms leading up in two directions, a new belly of light in the central nave of the old building and a central courtyard garden become the focus of new auditoria and classrooms
LAYER 11
SENSE AND SENSIBILITY

“...our epiphanies (are) inseparable from our chores, our poetry (is) intermingled with the prose of ordinary existence.”

Evidence of the sense and the sensibility is placed side by side as a list of seemingly unrelated events and sequences; words and phrases of thought, emotion and action; existing independently but given meaning by their proximity to each other and by being related to personal experience. Each written assemblage pieces together and assembles the story in time and place. It makes it real. It gives it flesh. The gaps between the thought pictures that are evoked by these words, are spaces of observation. Complimented by real images of the project; images of his thoughts about what the project should evoke and be; images of what the client thought; images of the furniture and household objects that the client wished to fill and personalize the spaces; or the absence of these things.

The sensibility of the private seeks its richness from quarters that exist independently of the public realm but at the same time it relies upon this public for its success. It is a financial equation of interdependency. He would like to loosen the constraints of this, or find ways to connect more profitably with it, or shift the bias of control so that it favours and makes possible the sensibility. In practice there is the constant shadow of financial uncertainty and possible collapse. When the work dries up, there is nothing to the creative hold. This is his second attempt at finding the hook that connects the sensibility with the sense. The first time it failed. He couldn’t function profitably, couldn’t locate his boundaries, couldn’t exercise his strengths, folded under his insecurities.

He is (now) looking for the hook. The thing that gives it meaning, makes it worthwhile, gives it substance, the thing that provides the joy.

He wants to operate within the parameters of the Spanish model of studio practice but has neither the unashamed brashness or independent financial backing to make this possible. He has little skill at salesmanship. He observes and fixates on the way other people operate; makes comparisons based on the fear and uncertainty that he feels. He wishes that he could better control the way the public realm intercepts the private.

In the past, the sense operated independently from the sensibility. He shifted between them; operating with either sense or sensibility. The sensibility left him open to criticism. The sense was easier to articulate and defend. The sensibility was dangerous territory. He was afraid of his sensibility.

A not atypical week begins: A house scheduled to go to Council yet again with yet another recommendation for approval. But will it get approved?

1966 born in Port Moresby, the third of three children

1976 moved to Sydney with my mother and sister, a child looking for a way in, then to Perth where the family reunites

1980 moved to Hobart to finish schooling, private (old) school, outside looking in

1985 moved to Sydney to go to university, shared flat with my brother and sister

1986 Felix González Torres’ mother dies of Leukemia

1988 first trip to London, Thatcher is Prime Minister in Britain, holiday in Barcelona

1989 returned to complete studies, learnt some Spanish

1991 moved to Barcelona; Ricardo, L’heure, Carlos, Natalie, new-ness and self

1991 Felix González Torres’ lover Ross dies of AIDS, his dad dies three weeks later, a hundred small yellow envelopes of his lover’s ashes

“Untitled” (Passport), 1991, Felix González Torres: “a passport to another place, to another life, to a new beginning, to chance; [...] a chance to alter one’s life and future, an empty passport for life: to inscribe it with the best, the most painful, the most banal, the most sublime, and yet to inscribe it with life, love, memories, fears, voids and unexpected reasons for being” 2

1993 returned to Sydney, painted kitchen yellow, reflection of another room at another place, another time

1996 meets Paul, and returns to Barcelona; Atanasius, large bare apartment with beautiful tiled floors, white walls and four metre high ceilings, Felix González Torres dies of an AIDS related illness, John Winston Howard elected Prime Minister of Australia

1997 Stephen meets Romeo

1998 return to Sydney with Romeo, Howard re-elected

1999 NATO war in the Balkans

2000 Father dies of Leukemia, aunt dies four weeks later, buried under a rose bush; listening to Florida recount in a motel room, George W Bush elected; Sydney Morning Herald every morning over breakfast, stolen generation, sorry, drug injecting rooms, depression

2001 Romeo, children overboard, world he knew fades away

2002 first period of self-employment ends with three year stint at the City of Sydney, interregnum

2003 moved to Bondi, return to Spain for four weeks, US forces invade Iraq

2005 travel to Spain for three weeks and re-establishes business

2006 Mother contracts Alzheimer's; longing

2007 commences exhibition, blue room emerges as a place in mind, an interpretation of an imagined space, striped carpet in yellow and an aubergine that looks brown, another room, another place, another time, travel to Barcelona, a new city plan generated on a structure of road alignments; John Winston Howard defeated

2008 a new room; luminous, connected with a slack string, leads from a yellow room with a brown bedspread..., Barack Hussein Obama elected 44th President of the United States of America, Stephen meets Mathieu
LAYER 12
THE COLLECTIVE AND THE SINGULAR

Stepping out

From the singular to the shared collective of experience; thoughts build up, communicated in sparse words, placed in short succession one line after another, poetic in the allusion to another thing perceived, felt and heard; leading the mind to create a picture from the unmade yet visually conceived field of imagery that these words describe; supported (or is it under-mined?) by corresponding images and drawings. A reflection of the inherent self-doubt that shadows and supports imagination and this fragile process of thought creation.

Stepping in

Project 04

What opportunity for…abstraction in the day-to-day?

Precedent

I try to imagine, to get you to imagine, a place
A representation of the city
Corners that exist but are not apparent
They are there, out of the frame, but only implied
A room of ‘beads’
Transparent
Or are they reflective?
…beads of light?

Like Felix González Torres’ curtains of gold, red and silver
To see the multiplicity of corners in a city
Each bead a corner in small scale
Is it the corner of an object or a building?
Which is multiplied many times in the space
(Cities make corners…corners make cities)
Or beads become rods of Perspex
A corner is printed on the bottom
Which you look up and through

An exhibition where you have to be lying on your back?
A city placed at eye level
And where some are:
Subtracted to make a space
Then filled to make a new corner
Forming an edge with the sky
The cornice of a space
Cornice of a room
Corners in section
Seen from within, the sky above
A ceiling of magical wonder
Lights hang from cables with shapes fixed as deflectors casting corners of light on the
floor
Mute and still
Shadows intercepted by people, the passage of a foot
Cables brushed
Shadows distort
The ‘city’ changes
One changeable view of an imaginary city on the ground
Another observation above interacting with the sky

Crisis of confidence…

Project develops
Lights now sit on the floor
A field of lights
Colour changes to blue
Rectangles of light
4 corners
casting pencil thin lines of blue light up
a place of ambiguity

Stepping out

Stephen wants to observe what the boy in the photo is observing; he is his creation, and yet it is only through the eyes of this boy that he can see and apprehend what there is to observe in the spaces that he creates and the sensory response that is made through it. It is through the perceived wonder of everything that the boy experiences, that Stephen is able to imagine the sensory sequence and character of the spaces that are divulged from his mind. Visually, the boy appears to be of a certain age. Metaphysically the boy has no age, is unaffected by time, he exists outside time, as a reflection of his inner world and a witness to the things that are being observed and experienced.
Stepping in

Project 05

Rough texture of a wall felt rather than seen

Mood

Reflections of a green watery surface

The smooth whitish grey of plaster

Criss-crossing lines of colour above

Intensity and paleness of light and colour

Ambiguity: under the sea?

Ambiguity: myth and mystery

Place of make-believe

Green

Close down the light, a lens contracting, the eye adjusting

Joy

People whisper

Occasional laughter

Forgetting momentarily where you are

Remembering (where you are) and of culture

Distance, the infinity of imagination

Sky

Pale blue

Fractured reflections of light through a gemstone

Deep blue of darkened space

A blue tinged light

Edges of light

The bluish texture of a sprayed concrete wall

2008

Competition

Australian Pavilion

Venice
a walled enclosure and collonaded perimeter controls movement
which sits over and around a walled enclosure, that folds over and in at the top surrounds a changing exhibition surface of shadows and activity ...which

(an aperture bringing light into the space)

sits on a podium;

Lightness

Infinity

a painted surface
(a false sky)
on a luminous fabric, which is stretched and gathered at the sides and surrounds

appears like a fresco from within the gallery (like the ceiling of the Palazzo Ducale in Mantua with its sky, figures and clouds bringing light into the space)

Darkness

like the ‘dome of the transparente’ in toledo, where figures look down from a ‘bag of light’ through a breach in the surface above (to a dark and atmospheric space of the seabed)

that is surrounded by a carpet of black gravel and a forest of trees

a waterfront entry leads to a passage;

a crevass of light in the podium
Felix González Torres occupied a place that was peripheral to his culture (Cuba), his adopted country (the United States), and peripheral to the political currents at the time. I am attracted to the feelings embedded in the work, its minimalism and sensuality. To do the kind of work that he wanted to do (which was about gay love, death, immigration, poverty and HIV AIDS) for people who had no interest in being confronted with these subjects, the idea had to be positioned as the sub-text of the work. He tells one story behind another and alludes to things through absence. This creates a space of perception for people to fill in their own way. It allows the work to hold the ideas of both its creator and its audience. The respective points of observation create a single space of meaning. The sub-text is there for those who wish to observe it and by people who observe from similar viewpoints.

As the year that he first lived in Barcelona, 1991 was the spring point for Stephen. He had a desire to operate outside culture and sub-culture, un-fettered by attachment to established systems of belief. Barcelona helped him to think about the in-between. What he was able to observe in 1991 was the first period of open-ness after 40 years of Fascism. Architects had aligned themselves with whomever they wished, finding a space in-between the political. There was no either / or. The same process of alignment applied to architecture. Modernity had not been allowed to let go of history. New was placed against old.

Barcelona also helps to describe the intersection between the personal and the professional, the first tentative steps at referencing private fields of observation, action and critique with a particular public dialogue.

In Barcelona: learning to let go; finding new personal space; relinquishing the hold of the past; exploring and silently empathizing with the history of the city, the country, the battles based on human, cultural and democratic ideals; the conservative backlash unleashed with violence and enforced by the authority and privilege of the church and the wealthy; all of these things parallel the battles taking place inside of him, accumulated over the previous ten years but forged and determined by the provincial, ideological, sociological and sexual battles of generations past.

Stepping in

Stepping out

Project 06

A road through
Ugliness
Complexity; section, length, height
Darkness
Flooding danger
Centre
Large scale relationships
Things capable of being seen and those that are not
Fixed dimensions, limited changeability
Ambiguity of private and public
Political dimensions

2006 - 2008
Macquarie Park
Development Control Plan
If he can engage with the way things operate within local government, knowing as he does the way time and the accumulated opinions of others erode an idea, this is the energy that can be derived from the process. The process can be resisted and fought against or allowed to take its own course. It is in this meandering and compromised environment of development, left weakened to some degree by a lack of fully resolved and intellectual engagement, that he feels certain gaps and voids of possibility are opened up. It is within this process of, perhaps flawed, evolution that he sometimes feels that he can contribute. There is a certain confidence that is gained by not having to defend what he believes in or wishes to be doing, at some other perhaps more elevated level of design exploration. He realises, quite early on in the work, that it is likely that nothing of what he does will come to fruition. He works exclusively with the facts, of which uncertainty of outcome is the key operating mantra. The absence of expectations releases him from emotional attachment to the work. Aligning new roads along property boundaries therefore becomes a critical component of this strategy. Presenting a logical progression of intervention and implementation to landowners is easy. He recalls the cycles of eager engagement with ideas in de Solá’s office. Memories of the days and weeks of focusing on the intentions of his boss, in an attempt to understand the intellectual strategy and appreciate the political circumstances of delivering it, dwell in the background. Through this experience comes a sense of resignation.

There is satisfaction from working through the complex realities of inserting a new road through an existing shopping centre: the finite physical constraints of the existing building and the fixed dimensions of road lane widths, bicycle paths and footpaths. Different possibilities emerge; over a 4-6 storey structure; structural systems and levels; absence of light; bridges crossing over at various different heights and positions; building added to without architectural logic; traffic circulating into the building and exiting at different stages onto the road, increased capacity, aware of the possibility of additional capacity brought on by future residential growth above.
This work allows him to engage at a level of intervention in the city, at a remove from the responsibility of thought and action that architectural construction entails. He can speculate about what things might be like if they (government, government agencies and the people that sponsor them) were to support the idea, to get them to think of what opportunities might await in the future. He is always conscious that there is little interest in the idea behind something. The emphasis is on yield and the likely financial benefits, improved efficiency in terms of address, attracting customers, increasing traffic circulation and capacity; these are the things that are associated with the salability of an idea. The client operates at several levels, each one situated at another point of remove from the one he deals directly with. He is conscious that this situation weakens his capacity to have an idea take hold. He is not able to explain an idea at all the junctures of its inception and sale within government; that the words that he uses to describe it will be re-interpreted by someone else when they are called upon to describe it in another perhaps less sympathetic forum, to someone else, leaving it open to the separate interpretation of other people. What version lives on and takes shape in the minds of others? So he has to find other ways of operating and loosening his hold and interest over an idea. He has to structure a dialogue in a language that carries meaning and yet is accessible, and capable of easy interpretation.

He imagines what a street will be like, a building on the street, a park and a building. He imagines driving on the finished street, of the materials and its urban character. He wonders what parts of the finished product will be identifiable as ‘his’, which ones will he disown, which components will he rejoice in, which components will leave him depressed and disheartened as a failed opportunity. He doesn’t have high expectations for what will be achieved. He imagines a rather forlorn area struggling to capture and distil any sense of urbanity or any character that would suggest innovation.

The totality of the project holds more interest than anything else, the opportunity to think big, to conceptualise the kinds of projects that he would like to be able to do, even though he realizes that the scale of these projects place them outside his perceived capacity to do them. They remind him of the sorts of projects that he was doing in Spain. He is excited by the possibilities of them, the opportunity to remake places based around the tangible constraints of existing infrastructure, road networks, topography and the structural conditions of existing buildings that cannot be altered without significant cost. The kinds of projects that meet resistance: to think in alternative ways, to imagine new spatial experiences, to spend the necessary time thinking about them and making them possible.

With Project 06 he is momentarily excited by the opportunity to imagine something new that could emerge as a direct response to these constraints.
A job reluctantly taken out of necessity. He is giving the work out now, in a position that enables him to sponsor design, and the work of others; a position of relative authority that he would have liked to have been able to court in his previous and subsequent roles as a private practitioner. It is all done within the limits set out by the bureaucracy, acknowledging the lines of power and influence; trying to exert control of the decision making process by accentuating the positive and parallel aspects that each person wants to hear acknowledged relating to their domain. At the same time he tries to overcome the people whose complaints about functionality, materiality, lack of appreciation of design or insistence on heritage mimicry threaten to undermine the success of the process through the attrition of slow attack.

He had several bosses beginning with the manager, leading to the director. The director became the city architect, to be replaced by another director who was answerable to the general manager, who was answerable to the lord mayor, who was answerable to the voters. The projects he gave to other architects had each tier as a client.

The project began with a brief that was written by his predecessor; a hundred page document of deliverables and requirements, much of which was mandatory legal material associated with copyright ownership mandating ownership to the city and other legal responsibilities. No other ‘version’ of the project is permissible to be built within a 10 km radius of the site. The budget has already been set, but there are no clear parameters under which the quality, finish and materials have been determined. No allowance for the parlous condition of the building is made nor the heritage constraints of the work, either in terms of projected cost or projected time.

He makes a list of preferred three tenderers, which is run past the lower tier of authority above him for approval. Two additional tenderers are added to the list; an architect ‘recognised’ for his heritage ‘expertise’ (no design talent), another architect because of his political standing in the city and corporate credentials (no design originality). He weighs the selection criteria in favour of those who focus on the process of design, as an exercise of interest and value in and of itself and not a stage in the overall process to be merely passed through, smaller companies whose passion is design and not the corporate led ethos of an office hierarchy that limits the input of directors in favour of lower cost junior staff.

The client is made up of many groups: The managerial group of project delivery of which he was part, the political group, which instigated the project, the patrons of the building made up of the general interested and uninterested public, the political constituency, the commercial operators within the building’s public entertainment section, the maintenance division within Council. All of these groups have their own commercial and managerial interests, and the project’s perceived deficiencies are used by each of the personalities to stage an argument in favour of their own grievances. Another territory of influence and intrigue operates around the project.

2002
After working as a sole practitioner for three years, Stephen closes his studio in 2002, to become the Senior Urban Designer, City Projects, at the City of Sydney. He works there for three years, spending most of his time as the design manager on several early stages of the Sydney Town Hall refurbishment.

1997 - 1998
Manuel de Solá-Morales
Public square, bus station and railway interchange
Leuven, Belgium
Stephen was the project architect for the first stage
He wants design to be a central factor in the project’s delivery but he realizes that this will have to be the sub-text of the project, developed in tandem but separately to the story that is constructed and managed around its efficient delivery. A political strategy of operation takes shape. Design is his story, the narrative of which is articulated in different degrees of detail depending on the perceived interests of his audience. He works out which people he can appeal to for support and the reasons why they might be more or less receptive depending on the issue that requires resolution. He focuses on producing an even financial and programmatic evolution of the project to reassure his director of its evolving success and to deflect any un-necessary, and from their uninterested perspective, attention on the design aspects of the project. He is aware that at a certain stage in the project, things may lose momentum and the gloss of a smooth and painless delivery will be replaced with a barely concealed frustration at time delays, cost over-runs, and the noise of complaint about design. Design will become the focus of everyone’s grievances and the arguments that will be used against the project will have no bearing on the constraints under which everyone has had to operate.

The changes in the political hierarchy will mean that decisions that have been made at the project’s inception will have been forgotten when the time comes to see the finished project. The political imperative to undertake certain strategies and the difficulties of inception and realization will also be forgotten. Designs will be altered and materials will be changed during construction. A decision forged in discussion with the first lord mayor will be queried by the second and then reversed by the third after it is three weeks out from completion and at a lost cost of over $1 million.

The design and operation of the European toilet pans, chosen because they were the shallowest ones available that complied with the Australian standard, will be challenged upon installation because they allowed inspection of the stool and therefore entailed an unwanted increase to the maintenance budget. Every tier of management and political office will be consulted and asked to adjudicate with their opinion. The general manager, a big man, will contribute by trying out the toilet, and deliver the verdict that they are indeed too small and not fit for purpose. A lord mayoral directive will be issued to investigate the implications of removing all of the recently installed pans on the grounds that they were defective. Concurrently, the celebrated French designer of the toilet pans will be visiting Sydney and be handed the keys to the city, a symbolic gesture of esteem for his contribution to design. The cost of replacement will be $40,000 but as there is no alternative product on the Australian market that will fit within the mandated requirements of the code, a decision will be taken to keep the pans. The basins will then become the focus of renewed attention. Intentionally small so that the required numbers could be accommodated within the confines of the existing rooms, concern will be voiced about the seeming similarity between basin and urinal and the potential for confusion. A committee of political and executive officers will be formed to assess the potential deficiencies and the possibility for confusion engendered by the design, shape, mounting height and the physical properties of use.
A site in the country
No site within the site
An idea of a place on the high ground
Hard to deliver materials to
  Client x 2
  Friends
6 months in their spare room
  Don’t pay rent
  Quid pro quo
  No set budget
  Low cost
  3 parts
The Golden Mean
A living room that sits apart
  Pot belly stove
  The idea of a shell
  Close up
Open up at the corners and sides
  Views framed
  Right angles dissolve
  Closes down at night
  A room for sleeping
Proportionally smaller than the living module, ‘folds out’ to the east
  Divides in 2
  Mats on the floor
  A wet room for bathing and the toilet
Proportionally smaller than the sleeping module, folds out to the south
An in-between space that connects
  Simple skillion roofs join
  Form a single faceted whole
Based on the ‘Golden Mean’; a main building for living, dining and kitchen; contains the smaller proportions of two separate rectangles within it.

Like a box swivelling out on itself, the 2nd smallest of these rectangles rotates out 120º (sleeping module).

The 3rd smallest rotates out from within this another 30º degrees (toilet and bathing).

The space between is both an internal and outdoor room, with views in three directions over the surrounding hills and valley.
an in-between space that connects
This letter is in response to a letter dated 10th July 2008, which was addressed to my clients. Your letter raises the following three issues and seeks further clarification and supporting information for each item… It is noted that the rationale for the siting of the addition is already extensively detailed in the Statement of Environmental Effects and in further correspondence issued to Council by myself and...

It must be noted that this development has been before the Heritage Council on two occasions. On both occasions the Heritage Council recommended approval… It is noted that this issue was addressed and explained in some detail during our meeting at Council on 17th April 2008 and more recently during an on site meeting on 9th July 2008. It was also dealt with in some detail in a letter to the General Manager from Cityplan Services, dated 10th April 2007. At a further meeting between Council officers and my client on 15th July 2008, which I did not attend, Council suggested several modified locations and heights for the ridge may be possible.

"Thanks for your update… A couple of things… We all met with Greg… Your understanding of the changes is correct… Just letting you know… I should explain a few other things…"
We will readjust the position of the windows... I will prepare a formal response... Yes, your first interpretation is correct... You will see from the previous stream of emails... As agreed in one of our recent meetings... This is just to confirm your acceptance of... We’ve been trying to resolve... Just to clarify your comment... I’ve spoken to... 10am is fine... The stays mean that winders are redundant... We have already done a lot of research into... I don’t think I got a response from you about... If the rear slate is lifted and replaced I think... Please see below... The contract is about 50 double-sided pages... This is to confirm our phone call... Please find a copy... I just tried calling you at home but... I’m not entirely sure... The interface between the old and new parts is an area that we won’t be able to be completely certain of... Probably best if I come out... Yes, frustrating indeed.”

The house’s history

The Chalet is a very rare and distinctive example of an early prefabricated timber Swiss cottage in Australia. Dating from 1855, the house was imported from Hamburg, Germany, by Swiss émigré, Etienne Bordier and erected by indentured German tradesmen. The house remains the only surviving cottage of four prefabricated cottages originally erected as part of Bordier’s planned speculative development at Hunters Hill. Aesthetically, The Chalet is distinctive and rare in Australia as a fine, highly crafted example of a picturesque and authentic Swiss or possibly Bavarian timber cottage from the Victorian period. The Swiss cottage is complete with its original collection of decorative details, such as moulded timber joinery and doors, door hardware, fixtures and fittings. The prefabricated house design may have been the prototype for the 1855 Paris Industrial Exhibition, erected in Hamburg, where Bordier purchased the house in 1854.

The client’s history

Dear Y,

Thank you for your email. I understand that you have concerns... I do however feel that there are a number of considerations that you need to be made aware of before we... make the change to masonry. As I can see it there are four possible options that are available to you... If we change (the addition) to an all masonry building, it will change both the feel, the character and quite likely the cost quite considerably. This is because the design was envisaged... as something quite light... This became especially apparent when we decided to open up the family and games room on all sides and have the grouping of private rooms (bedrooms and bathrooms) lifting up over these rooms. If we construct the walls to the 1st floor main bedroom in masonry, it will entail a dramatic change from this solution because it will have the effect of giving the 2nd storey addition the appearance of greater mass... I feel that the transition into the attic is also better when the walls leading into it are a composite of timber and glass. The design... should be possible to achieve with slender sections... on the ground floor which I think are an important component of maintaining the greatest possible connection between the family and games rooms and the outdoor areas. Brick columns will be much thicker... and will alter this lightness and openness (and) a reinforced concrete slab will need to be built on the first floor to carry the weight of the masonry. The second
option, which is what we were looking at initially, could be a composite of masonry and timber. This would use timber to the first floor and change to masonry at the rear north-eastern section of the children’s bedrooms and maybe a part of the northern wall of the last bedroom facing onto the garden. However I feel that this end elevation would be better if it was predominantly glass...to enable views onto the garden...It would be a simpler and more elegant solution to have a singular and uniform material treatment of the external building facade. This way the whole addition reads as one unified building as opposed to separate elements. I appreciate that you have serious concerns...However, a modified timber option could be developed that satisfies...This could easily be a painted option that incorporates finer, more delicate and open-able screens of timber over the windows. The internal walls of the children’s bedrooms, bathrooms, laundry could also be constructed in rendered masonry using a reverse timber veneer construction. Apart from creating a ‘solid’, durable and secure feeling to the interior of these rooms, in terms of thermal performance, this system of construction would also provide the best form of insulation...(and) will also be a more economical way of constructing the first storey part of the addition. I think you are right about the need for a balance and correct in pointing out that the Victorian addition is masonry. However...using timber seems much more appropriate and much more likely to produce the best architectural solution. I talked about this at length with W...(but) if you still feel that the masonry route is the only option then I will...proceed with this. With regards to the retaining wall, it is certainly worth getting the additional area as you say by shifting it closer to the boundary. With respect to the early afternoon sun to the family room and main bedroom, I note X’s concerns. I am aware that this is something that needs to be addressed. I was always assuming that the western walls will need to incorporate some form of flexible shade protection. In terms of the bedroom, I thought this could be in the form of sliding screens. There are a number of possibilities for the family room...which we will investigate as the project develops...We will need to prepare shadow diagrams...and will provide a complete set once they are complete...I have spoken with Z and she can meet on Friday.

Dear Stephen,

Just got back...and caught up with my emails. If we are to meet late this week, Thursday is a good day for X. I will fax the sewerage diagrams to you...Further thoughts I have had re plans (forgive me if I repeat myself): Cellar needs to be temperature controlled and I would like to use it as a cold storage room as well so when we entertain large numbers I can leave large volumes of food in there. This means temperature control has to be fairly accurate and constant (a dedicated AC?). X wants the house to be...wired up to do a lot of things. He can discuss details with you when required as he is more informed about those things. I have had second thoughts about the main bedroom and I think it would be preferable to have a separation of the main bedroom suite from the children’s. I want a proper dressing room. The clothes storage in the dressing room needs to be extremely capacious...Opening windows in bathrooms. As much natural light as possible. Energy saving and water saving strategies to be incorporated. Definitely a rainwater tank for garden and pool. Solar / gas heating for pool. Solar water heating? Important for the rooms to have a vista
of sorts whether it is an internal or external view, it must be something pleasant. I am still determined to use the roof space for X’s office/meeting room. It will need a screened alcove of sorts to house filing cabinets, printers etc which I don’t like cluttering up the main space. Part of it needs to accommodate a sitting area for informal meetings (sort of like a gentleman’s lounge). I’ll keep you posted...

Regards Y

The bureaucrats

Madame mayor, meetings, lodge, re-lodge, extra information required, correspondence, telephone calls, presentations, logic, (and in contra), planning rules, planning precedents, land and environment court, objector's rights, more details (needed), heritage office, heritage council, Councillors, the most significant house in Australia, the most significant tree in Hunters Hill, hyperbole, fact, fiction, rescind, approve, defer, Pre-Da, DA, DA approved, DA no longer approved, re-submit DA, more presentations, more information,

The objectors

Lawyers, patriarch of heritage architecture in Australia says...we think that...it is...disgusting, we are disadvantaged, can’t be allowed, if you believe in Hunters Hill, shouldn’t be allowed, lose our views, will increase aircraft noise, roots of trees will be affected by increased traffic (from two extra cars), lane is too narrow for car entry (but it's fine for us), we invited them into our home but they didn’t listen to us (we don’t believe what you say), your consultants are not independent (yet ours are because we have paid for them to say what they believe even though it happens to coincide with what we believe whereas you have paid for yours to say what you want them to say), build it in the west of the existing house (how you will connect it?), we wish (do not wish) to understand the impact that it will have, nor do we accept that it will then be completely visible from the street.

The builder

Stephen...could you please supply the following measurements:
Exact location of floor waste in bathrooms 1 and 2
Exact location of bath waste
Exact location of sink within the laundry
Exact location of shower rose and bath tapware (and)
Please verify the NON existence of a floor waste in the laundry.
Project 09
House
Suburban
Sydney

one (faceted) roof; covering both first storey (new and old, in orange) and ground floor (blue) and;

an arrangement of connecting spaces that move between the old and the new; neither completely inside nor outside but both inside (yellow) and outside (blue)
Thin poles of light cast on the trunks of slender trees
Skeletal forms planes and surfaces peeling and lifting
Different coloured surfaces are one and the same
Green
Undressed timber
Skin
Lightness
Insect-like
Changing parameters
Personalities
Alignment in time
Expectations of client
Expectations of users
My expectations
Longevity

It began with a big outdoor space, part of an office development in a rapidly expanding area of Sydney, the kind of space that he knows no thought has been put into by the architects who have just built the building. The building is sheeted in mirrored glass, 5 storeys sitting on a podium of parking, a 3500 sqm site occupation with an 800sqm quadrant removed from one of the corners but only above the podium, the corners are chamfered. The façade has no articulation. The glass is tinted green and blue. The whole building ensemble has its twin, mirrored on the other side of a 6m access road.

One idea embraced and then rejected. The design changes; a safer, low-risk, low maintenance alternative is sought by the client.

He imagines an imaginary surface, lifting up from the flat horizontal, to define the shape of the roof forms. This creates a new fractured surface of planes when seen from above, and a new underside of timber when seen from below.

When he began he imagined the space as a rich series of water gardens, a place of wonder, repose and refuge. He then imagines the space filled with people, some seeking the dappled shade of leaves, some at the edges and looking in. He imagines people seeking to hide from the gaze of people in the offices above; he imagines people above looking down and deriving some sense of relief from their jobs by seeing a vast deck of developed trees flowering in spring and autumn. He imagines the place at night, with the shelters used as a way to diffuse and soften the glare of internal office light; something delicate in a place without delicacy.
Skeletal forms
planes and
surfaces,
peeling and
lifting

Project 10
Office roof garden
Suburban
Sydney
“Dónde estoy, dónde estoy. ¿Dónde debo estar y no estoy? ¿Dónde recuerdo haber estado y nunca he estado? ¿Dónde estar? ¿Cómo estar? ¿Cómo llegar al sitio donde nunca estaré y debo estar para estar ?…”

(Where am I, where am I? Where should I be and (yet) I’m not? Where do I remember having been and never been? Where to be? How to be? How to arrive at the place where I will never be and must be to be)...
CONCLUSION

Refrain

The cone; sketched for me in 2002 by Leon van Schaik; as layers of circles, each one placed on top of the other, forming a two-dimensional representation of a seemingly isolated discovery; leading inexorably upwards and slowly diminishing in diameter, narrowing the frame of reference as the subject of the research becomes clearer. Each layer contains a distinct (apparently unrelated) sub-set of knowledge.¹

2009

From the pinnacle of the cone; starting from the past (the wide base) and working my way back to the present.

2002

A search for understanding through research that was commenced, without fully knowing, with nothing more than a sense of frustration at the seemingly impossible and un-reachable goal to function profitably as an architect, how to craft practice in the way I would choose to operate; with a practice that could be based on the desire to speculate and create; (and yet) engaged with the reality of commerce and the un-knowable personality traits of clients and other people outside the work; not quite knowing why it was that I was undertaking the research except for something intuitive, focused on the professional and the architectural and initially located at a great distance from the personal. In its original form, governed by the idea that there was only one way to do a Doctor of Philosophy, as a subject of stiff and colourless objectivity (an attempt to articulate the subjective in the objective); an historian’s take on practice through the medium of research, limited and limiting by its exclusive reliance on architectural history, incompatible with the attempt to reveal new truths about the practice of architecture by an architect (me).

2004

A shift occurs:

Up until this time, I am absent from the research; positioned in a place observing things that did happen or may have happened in the past in Spain (1930s onwards) and ever more recent past (1990s), in the hope that this would reveal truths about the present (2000s), and be translatable from one place to another (Spain to Australia).

¹ Noted in the Prologue
Me: Beginning with the idea of a conventional academic thesis with an historical focus; it became an exploration back in time to try and understand the source of attraction to Spain; and the source of the modern in Spain, an architectural journey bound in with the early twentieth century history of the country (from a political, cultural and architectural perspective), unknowing (and yet suspecting) that part of the attraction stemmed from my own un-realised sense of the peripheral from a geopolitical sense (as an Australian), and of sexuality: That Spain represented a place where that sense of the peripheral could be challenged and loosened on the one hand (to foster my energy and enthusiasm) and also maintained (the comfort derived from not being at the centre of things but being able to look out and choose the bits that fit); the sense of a loose and fluid ambiguity; a place to be many things (not either one or the other).

2005

(“This is who you are; this is the grammar of your identity.” 2)  

So the story of the architectural journey, as it moves back in time, starts to parallel the personal story.

A first tranche of projects and professional roles was reviewed: Project 01, Project 07, Project 10, with the aim of understanding where I was coming from and wishing to travel to.

2006 2007 2008

Consolidation

Leading to another series of new projects and revisions of previous projects, further exploration, and a lessened interest in the architectural influences of the work, in favour of the literary and artistic parallels that shadow the work or from which my intentions and desires could more faithfully be compiled and described: Project 02, Project 03, Project 04, Project 05, Project 06, Project 08, Project 09.

2009

The paradigm of architectural operation in its many guises (that are both metaphorical and real, based on the sense of action and the sensibility of thought, and often vice versa) through which all observations and decisions within any work start to move and relocate themselves, over and over in the same project, sometimes shifting backwards, sometimes

leaping forwards; bringing with them elements of the past (forged in self-doubt and yet shaped by a slow and un-stoppable journey to garner as much understanding and truth from these experiences) and aspiring a push towards the future (marked by the pull of ambition); engaging with the elusive and irrepressible drag of memory and melancholy; both weaving back through the past (the projects in Barcelona as well as the projects in Sydney) and being woven into it (my personal story of Barcelona and Hobart in Project 01), leading me to the research and then out of it (to this conclusion).

The journey of the research has been over seven years. The journey behind the research has been taking place since I was able to think upon and draw from (my) surroundings; placed into sharper relief in adolescence, characterised by an attempt to make sense of the disparate elements, of the essential instability that comes from a desire to know more deeply and fully about the things that surround me.

Leading back to the past (2002), references and objectives in projects become apparent, as do the desires, memories (to which I am beholden), frustrations and the unrealised expectations that course through the work, and upon which the research is founded: It becomes progressively more apparent that Project 01 was the starting point, in both time and thought, for the research; both its reason for being and becoming.

The discovery leads to the blue room; a blue that is almost black. A (new) paradigm of observation about practice.
POSTSCRIPT
It is through the creative act that he reaches a state of pure, incomparable consciousness, of himself in the world and of the world in relation to him. This consciousness is made heavy and light with sensations imprinted on the mind through observation. Without which it would not be possible to create. Each manifestation of the room holds out the hope that another room will be revealed that facilitates a new path of memory connected to a new path of thinking about the same thing in a new way. The neuronal pathway between this act of consciousness and the psychological process that constitutes the room, turning it into something real that is then articulated in a project, sitting silently behind it, is the signature of creativity.

Stephen

(Re) iterates:

Every project is a balance between the personal and the impersonal; of things that are internalised and externalised;... constituting the movement between client and architect. In the finished work: Everyone will develop their own narrative... which acts as a kind of release.

He understands:

That the things that he collects and translates are legible to him in a very specific way;... but someone else will experience them in a completely different way.

He imagines:

That people experience his buildings as he conceives them, affecting a transition between the personal realm of his imagination into the physical space of occupation: That a building has to account for this ambiguity; the possibility that it can be many things. He has been trying to objectify sensations of subjective fact throughout the research; and yet, there is no truth except differing interpretations, all of which are equally valid.

He observes that:

“we are all ‘both and’.”
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