Collapsing Hierarchies:
Party Walls, the Rarefied, and the Common

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

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Sam Kebbell
September 2016
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Abstract

Architects in Wellington during the 1970s embraced what they considered to be a universal context for modernity in pursuit of a common architectural language. They were criticised by a generation of regionalists that followed them in the 1980s for ignoring the idiosyncrasies of place and people that make a local architecture distinct. Since the 1990s, architects embraced much more particular contexts, including the idiosyncrasies of a site and client, in the pursuit of rarefied institutional, corporate, and personal expression. Recent enthusiasm for the particular is a long way from the universal contexts of the 1970s, and a common architectural language is a long way from the more recent rarefied forms of expression, but the legacy of these shifts remain a critical background to the contemporary discussion here. How then, might a practice embrace both particular and universal contexts, and through those, both rarefied and common forms of expression?

My original contribution to knowledge is the explanation of my approach to practice, which is a response to this question. This study is undertaken through my contribution to the architectural practice, KebbellDaish, through which I have sought to collapse hierarchies that emerge around the rarefied and the common. The work shows that it is not an absolute hierarchy, but a dynamic between high culture and vernacular, modesty and ambition, crude and refined, and so on. The dynamic is played out on a few walls of each project, through overlaps of personal and public interests, the realities of particular circumstances, and speculations on a project’s context: from neighbourhoods to cities, regions, typologies, and cultural conventions.

Keywords: Practice-based research, architecture, design, New Zealand, conversation.
Figure 4. Richard Blythe, Diagram of the three orders (2014)
Introduction

“What if design practice matters and is researched? What would we do? How would we do this? What would we discover?” (van Schaik et al., 2012)

This is a study of my practice, KebbellDaish, that I founded in Wellington with my former teacher, John Daish, in 2002. The overall objective of this research has been to make the tacit knowledge in my particular practice explicit and explain how that practice fits into an architectural community. The bibliography contains a number of key references to material that has shaped my overall approach to the research. Those methods have been largely developed by the community at RMIT (van Schaik et al., 2011), the ADAPT-r network (Blythe et al., 2013), and others in the field of creative practice research. A detailed reflection on the research methods is included in the discussion within the first two chapters.

The first two chapters parallel the orders of design knowledge, as described by Richard Blythe in a public lecture at RMIT (Blythe, 2014). Blythe describes the first order of knowledge at the level of the project and the second at the level of the practice. While the third order for Blythe involves the close study of a group of practices to establish patterns across them, my own third chapter involves the slightly different exercise of positioning my own practice in the context of others. Put simply, in the first chapter I describe the case study projects; in the second chapter, I describe the processes that span across those projects; and in the third chapter, I put the practice in context.
In Chapter One I use six case studies to explain how the particularities of each project connect to various aspects of their individual contexts. Our first project was an office fit-out for the international advertising agency Saatchi & Saatchi (page 119). As we began on the project, we learned that when their office became very busy, creative staff often retreated to holiday houses on the coast to focus on their work. We responded by modelling our design on something between an artist’s studio and an urban caravan park. A more recent project called Humbug, a house and studio for a painter and his family, brings the logic of architecture and painting together (page 21). They meet at one point in a series of black and white striped deck chairs, similar to traditional vernacular awnings in the local village, but because they are hung as a series across the façade they also invoke the work of French artist Daniel Buren.

Within my own body of work, the dialogue between painting and architecture is particular to Humbug, but like the Saatchi & Saatchi project, it also connects to aspects of its context: a tradition of painting to which the striped canvas and Peter’s own work belongs, and the local vernacular architecture. Through reflecting on projects like these, I have uncovered my fascination with making connections between different aspects of a project’s context. Some aspects are particular to the project, and others are universal across large groups of projects, types, or situations. I materialise those connections in forms of expression that are both rarefied and common, and I frequently collapse the hierarchies between these two orders of expression within a project: Buren and the deck chairs, for example.

Here, and in the discussion that follows, I use the word ‘common’ for its meaning as widespread, or widely understood; in opposition to my use of the word ‘rarefied’. I use both the terms ‘common’ and ‘rarefied’ to discuss architectural language and forms of expression, and I use the terms ‘particular’ and ‘universal’ to discuss contexts.
In the second chapter, called ‘Cons of the Practice’, I explain the processes I have developed to make connections and collapse hierarchies. I elaborate in that chapter on what I mean by collapsing hierarchies, how I do it, and why it is important (page 248). There are four main processes, the first and most important of which is conversation. I explain the role of both personal and public conversations in searching the contexts of a project; how conversation enables a variety of connections to be made; and how speculative aspects of my work can invite the dialogue to continue. I also begin to explain how all these processes conflate on a few particular walls of each project where people, ideas and images meet: what I call the ‘Party Wall’.

The architectural community around my practice has presented a range of views on particular and universal contexts, and a range of views on architectural language from the common to the rarefied. We can celebrate them all, but not easily align with them all. Some of the most celebrated architects in New Zealand have rejected aspects of the others to form their own position and several of those have been in the community immediately around our practice. But rather than place my own approach to practice somewhere on the continuums they established, I have sought to exploit the tensions between them as a creative platform. This research sets out to explain how I do that, and in so doing, answer the question,

How might a practice embrace both particular and universal contexts, and through those, both rarefied and common forms of expression?
Body of Work

The body of work that forms the raw material for this research began when I designed my parents’ house with John Daish in 1998, but case studies are drawn from KebbellDaish Architects’ projects since it was founded in 2002. Since then, KebbellDaish has worked on 39 projects, of which 18 have been built (Figure 6). The majority of these have been private commissions, mostly houses and office fit-outs. Competitions are less common in New Zealand than they are in Europe, and we have only entered two international competitions and one national competition. We were on a team that was short-listed in one of the international competitions, and we were on another team that won the national competition for the Blumhardt Gallery exhibition furniture.

It is the body of work, understood as the objects themselves and the process of designing them, that is under observation here. While the whole body of work has been under consideration, and the ideas discussed run through each project to varying degrees, I have focussed on significant projects as case studies for the research. I selected them because they have been the most productive experiments as I sought to understand and articulate the idea of ‘collapsing hierarchies’, which is the central intent of my approach to practice. They represent the two building types dominant in our work to date, houses and offices, and they also stretch across the whole period since 2002, including work done as part of the Ph.D. process itself.
Figure 6.
Chronology of KebbellDaish Projects (2016)
While I have led the design direction on most of the projects in our practice, John has been a close collaborator on all projects up until his retirement in 2009 and an influence on several subsequent projects. Many of them have included other collaborators too. Sometimes other architects have made major contributions, such as Rafe Maclean and Bernd Benninghoff with whom we collaborated on the DAC project. On other occasions we have worked with designers from different disciplines, as we did with industrial designers and landscape architects including Robbie van Dam, Ross Stevens and Megan Wraight on the Blumhardt Gallery project, the Saatchi & Saatchi fit out, and the Great Barrier Island house respectively. Especially between 2006 – 2012, the work was produced with senior staff, Soo Kim, Hamish Shaw, Kent Burns and Scott McKenzie who all made significant contributions to the body of work. Since 2012, I have joint ventured with architects Dan Popham and Al Crabb from Architecture Lab on several projects, including the Quite Simple House in PekaPeka. Throughout the text I refer to our practice, and we, when I am discussing topics or decisions where I am part of a group. I refer to my approach to practice, or I, when discussing specific actions, opinions, or experiences that are only my own.

My colleagues and collaborators have been an important part of the practice, but so too have several key clients, friends, family members, teachers, and local heroes. The biggest source of work for the practice, outside my own family, immediate colleagues, and
John, has been through the connections of two pivotal clients: Howard Greive and Peter Adsett, both of whom have become good friends and mentors (Figure 8). Howard Greive was one of two people responsible for commissioning KebbellDaish to design the office fit-out for Saatchi & Saatchi in Wellington. He has commissioned us four times since. Peter Adsett is a New Zealand painter living in Australia who, with his wife Suzie, commissioned us to design their house and Peter’s studio, ‘Humbug’. He introduced us to several other projects including the Courtyard House. The case study on Humbug includes a detailed view on the dialogue between Peter and me (page 50). Greive, an advertising ‘creative’ and Adsett, a painter, are part of a wider community of creative practitioners in my social environment.

All these people have had a significant impact on my approach to practice before the Ph.D. began, and since then my research into an understanding and development of that practice has brought me into new communities in the PRS and ADAPT-r networks. Within both of those networks, I have been the beneficiary of formal and informal discussions with colleagues and supervisors at each Practice Research Symposium (PRS), several conferences, ‘ADAPT-r Days’ with other ADAPT-r Research Fellows during 2015, and in meetings between all those events. The PRS system is then a significant part of the community around this Ph.D., and the PRS have been the most regular and influential form of public behaviour. The idea of a community of practice, developed from
Figure 7. PRS presentation, Ghent, April 2015
work by education theorist Etienne Wenger (2010), is regularly discussed at PRS presentations and this Ph.D. is strongly informed by those discussions. The book, By Practice By Invitation (van Schaik et al., 2011), explains the role of PRS in the context of both communities of practice and public behaviours.

The communities that John Daish brought to the practice are crucial to understanding the historical context of our work. I was a student of John’s at VUW in the 1990’s, I then worked for several years in his practice, John Daish Architects. It is with John Daish Architects that I worked on a house for my parents in 1998. John and I remained in touch when I studied and worked in the United States and Europe, and he encouraged my application to work at VUW where I still teach. John is thirty-four years older than me, and through him I developed a very personal view of the architectural thinking since he was a student in the 1960s. That view forms a large part of the background to my fascination with collapsing the hierarchies between rarefied and common forms of expression. I give a detailed account of this view in Chapter Three.
Projects through John, Peter, or Howard
Figure 8. Sources of work (2016)
Public Behaviours

Since the formation of KebbellDaish, I have also been an academic at Victoria University of Wellington (VUW). Before this Ph.D. I largely suppressed the influence of New Zealand architectural culture on my work, and that did not help bridge a difficult chasm between projects in practice and my own expectations of academic writing. My presentations of work in a research context were frequently paralysed by clutching at remote authorities, like the Situationists, Donald Judd, or Rosalind Krauss. My mode of writing relied on a dialogue with existing theoretical texts more than close observation of my own work in practice. Because it was not deeply invested in practice, writing like that stopped when the office became busy: it was dispensable. Other writing before the Ph.D. has been shorter, opinion based, and more part of a marketing system than a research practice. Over the course of the Ph.D. though, I have tended to fill the chasm with details of the work itself: close observation of what actually happened, how it happened, and what its potential implications might be.

During the Ph.D. I have also made several exhibition and conference presentations which, unlike previous presentations, make my design work itself the central focus. These include an exhibition presentation of Humbug in Brussels (Kebbell, 2014a), a public lecture about the same project at the City Gallery Wellington with Peter Adsett, and another exhibition presentation of the Resn project in Melbourne (Kebbell, 2014c). I also wrote a short survey of housing in New Zealand for Architecture Review Asia Pacific (Kebbell, 2014b) in which I considered some of the key projects by my New Zealand architectural colleagues. In these presentations, I have focussed much more on the realities of practice.
These presentations are part of a significant shift in my practice. The work itself, the design decisions, local conditions, and issues faced have moved to front and centre of my research direction. The shift has lubricated the practice as a research mechanism by facilitating the extraction of tacit knowledge from the doing of the work. Increasingly throughout the Ph.D. programme, I have become aware of the potential of framing this extractive process in the form of a story, and the potential of fiction and speculation in my public presentations. This approach to explication lends itself to accumulating the apparent minutiae of the realities of practice into larger narratives that are often underpinning the direction of a project, but it also opens up the possibility of using the work to speculate on the fabric of the cities and landscapes within which these projects sit.

Figure 9. Situation 14 Exhibition. Timber Framed Wall. © Georgina Matherson (2014)
Chapter One: Discovering Projects

This research is rooted in practice, in the work itself, and in this chapter I will describe that work, the way we went about it as an office, and my approach specifically. The aim of this chapter is to describe the case study projects in the way that I reflected on them during this Ph.D. research. I have done this by reflecting on the design process in each case, describing key decisions that highlight the priorities and concerns of my approach to practice. Through these case studies, I explain the particular circumstances of each project, aspects of their respective contexts, what I consider to be the key qualities of each project, significant parts of the design process, and the primary motivations.
The first major case study during this Ph.D. was a house and studio for a painter, Peter Adsett, his wife Suzie, and their children. The house is in a small village on the Mornington Peninsula, about one hour’s drive from central Melbourne. Many of the houses in the village are modest holiday homes. We wanted to extend that vernacular, but because Peter is a painter interested in architecture, we also set out to bring together the logic of painting and architecture. That logic is at its most explicit on the facade facing the street.
Figure 11. Ground floor and site plan (2009)
It has been a valuable case study because Peter had recently completed his Ph.D. by practice in painting and was therefore an enthusiastic conversationalist, and it was a self-conscious experiment in ‘collapsing hierarchies’.

The process began in conventional ways, but quite quickly it was clear the project would evolve out of a dialogue between Peter and me about architecture and painting, materialised in the house itself. Peter made contact with me in 2003 after a popular magazine published an article about KebbellDaish and the work we were doing for Saatchi & Saatchi (Spence, 2003). We began a conversation about painting and architecture, our mutual interest in each other’s discipline, and how the two disciplines were unnecessarily separated. We kept in touch and when Peter and his wife bought some land on the Mornington Peninsula not far from Melbourne in 2005, the conversation became more intense.
Figure 13. 3D view of exterior (2010)
The result is a very simply planned house that opens out to a lawn on one side and a more enclosed yard on the other. There are few interior walls and only one conventional interior door, to the bathroom (Figure 11). There is no steel in the structural system, and the materials throughout are common domestic building products: pine weatherboards and fibre cement sheet cladding, plaster board, plywood and masonry block inside. The house is designed around a two storey veranda which looks over a square lawn towards the street, and into the main bedroom and painting studio (Figure 12).

The house was positioned at the rear of the site from the very beginning (Figure 13). I proposed that the centre of the site should be a clearly defined plane that we could consider as a ‘painting’, with the house as part of its frame. Peter quickly recognised that from the street, though, that flat plane also works like a plinth for the house behind (Figure 20). So, we began by thinking of the lawn as the centrepiece framed by the house, but also its opposite, the house as the centrepiece on a grassy plinth. The building is held together with a repetitive timber frame, the geometry of which was also established early on in the process when we recognised that the 1200mm module was both the size of standard architectural elements and the width of most of Peter’s paintings. The dialogue between painting and architecture started in those early decisions and replays in several ways throughout the house.
Figure 15. Detail view of north facade © Sonia Mangiapane (2010)
The north side of Humbug photographs well (Figure 14) and close up photographs of it have aesthetic resemblances with Adsett’s paintings (Figure 16). Photographs of this side of the house have been more popular as a leading image by the architectural and popular press. A case study of the project might easily have focussed on this wall, but my attention has always been on the south wall which faces the street. More useful insights into my practice can be found in this wall.

I began to review digital drawings, photos of models, site photographs, and minutes made during the design process by date and milestone and retrace my steps through the project as if I was looking from outside of the process. At the first take, these data sets were very messy. I searched digital archives, old drawings and notebooks to review drawings which were rejected; the timing of key decisions; discussions over details; and records of visits in the neighbourhood.

I sifted through those records and identified key moments in the design process, in order to describe the lengthy process in an abbreviated but meaningful way and enable analysis of the logic underpinning decisions. I produced a chart which illustrates when milestones were reached for three main aspects of the house: the north and south elevations, and the plans (Figure 17). The south elevation stands out as a dramatically more protracted process than other parts of the house.
Figure 17. Humbug. Charting the main design decisions (2014)
By comparison with the south facade where the deck chairs and battens are, other parts of the house fell into place relatively quickly. While the plans did change in small ways in the early stages, they settled down and were only amended later as part of a cost-saving exercise. As I noted above, the repetitive structural frame was set up early in the process and not questioned.

In the first concept drawing looking at the south elevation (Figure 18) we explored a reflecting pool on the square plane at the centre of the site. It was converted back to grass by the second meeting, but the quality of that square as both a base for the building, and an object framed by the building, remained. To some extent the language in the north facade (Figure 19) is a legacy of the first sketch of the south. It is a successful facade, but for me, it is not as rich as the south facade. One cannot occupy the north wall, one can only occupy either side of it, and it does not have the same capacity to open up creative exchange either socially or aesthetically as the south side of the building.
Figure 19. North facade looking into downstairs living spaces. © Sonia Mangiapane (2010)
Figure 20. The statuette of Jesus standing on the lawn is in most of the professional photos of Humbug. It is a random inclusion, introduced by the photographer and Peter after I showed them the photos of Saatchi & Saatchi.
One of our conversations towards the end of the design process was about the location of the dark battens on that south elevation. We had drawn a tentative layout (Figure 36 on page 45) but we knew the wide battens were too clumsy and we agreed to resolve the composition on site. After a series of failed attempts, we retreated for lunch at which point we found an approach that worked. The composition fitted more delicately into the existing geometry than the previous drawings, we thought, but just as importantly it fitted the narrative we had constructed for ourselves around the project.
That narrative, which guided many of our conversations, was around substituting the idea of a painting as an object on a ‘neutral’ architectural background, with elements that flip between their status as object and background. The dynamic is something similar to the flip between figure and ground in the koru paintings by well-known New Zealand painter, Gordon Walters (Figure 24). Ultimately we were searching for a similar flip between the logic of painting and architecture.

The conversation over lunch relied on a sketch in plan rather than a study of the elevation (Figure 26). That is, we moved from the physicality of the site to the abstraction of a plan before returning to the site. Knowing that dark colours recede, we surmised that the batten would be perceived to be on the same plane as the black strip behind the negative detail. The white gap between the two black lines would then have a tendency to pop forward as if it were the batten, and the actual batten might appear as a cut in the white cement board sheet. This is to say that the object and background could flip, in our minds at least.

A koru is a stylized fern-leaf used in Maori carving and tattooing.
Figure 25. Detail view of the cement board and timber batten. © Sonia Mangiapane (2010)

Figure 26. Reconstructed sketch of the cement board and timber batten detail (2014)
Figure 27. Humbug folly in London (2015)
Board and batten cladding systems take many forms in Australasian vernacular. A large sheet with battens over the join is very common.

Wide timber battens over a layer of cement board, as shown here, is rare, but it demonstrates another variation on the traditional system.

To some extent that does happen, but it is only ever a fleeting experience because the shadow lines and reflected light tend to put things back in their place. When that happens they return to being just a variation, really, on the board and batten cladding that is quite commonly used for beach houses in Australia and New Zealand (Figure 28): descendants of the black framing with white plastered sod infill that have appeared in the European vernacular for centuries (Figure 27).
(Figure 30-33) Shoreham is a small town, with some permanent residents, but many of the houses are second homes for families living in Melbourne. The village is about a ten minute walk from a spectacular beach. Houses are often set back from the road and surrounded by trees.
Figure 31. View from the street on approach (2014)
Figure 32. Typical house in Shoreham (2014)
Figure 33. Typical house in Shoreham (2014)
So this narrative about painting and architecture is quite ambitious at one level, so far as it is a commentary on the two disciplines. It could be taken up as a kind of disciplinary campaign, and has been in a very minor way. But the story is also about something quite ordinary on another level as it aligns itself with a relatively low-brow vernacular tradition.

The story of the flipping object-background also loomed over the deck chair fabric where the motif of the black and white stripes began (Figure 20 on page 34), also on the south facade. The first concept drawing showed a number of tilted panels forming the balustrade on the upstairs veranda, but it was completely unnecessary to shut the building down like that and unnecessarily expensive to make it operable. After that drawing, we explored a series of options for the balustrade, none of which were particularly satisfying. We explored shadow, material compositions, and I even invited Peter to paint the panels thinking it was an obvious thing to do but something we had not tried. All these were attempts to bring painting and architecture into a more complex dynamic, but any painterly qualities that did emerge through these early experiments remained surface effects (Figure 34). As surface effects, they were unable to engage with non-painterly aspects of architecture, like utility, architectural type, or even structure. None of them worked well because they only served to perpetuate the place of painting as an appendage to architecture.
Figure 34. Various experiments with the street facade (2006-2009)
Chapter One: Discovering Projects

Figure 35. First model study of striped canvas balustrade-seating (2008)
Schematic resolution of the deck chairs was reached only just before we went into a building contract, and the detailing was resolved on site during construction. Perhaps I struggled with this part of the building because I saw it as the most important part of the house and wanted to make sure it worked. I consider the space of the veranda itself, and the process that produced it as the most significant site for creative exchange. Apart from the intellectual exchange between painting and architecture, there is a spatial exchange there too: being on the edge of the studio, Peter can pull back from a painting and reflect on it at a distance (Figure 38).
This Robin Boyd house is only a few minutes walk from Humbug. The long veranda looking out over the landscape is a common trope of Australian architecture.
Figure 38. Section through veranda (2009)
Figure 39. Peter Adsett in his studio with veranda. © Sonia Mangiapane (2010)
Social exchange can happen on the veranda too: on the edge of the bedrooms, teenagers can claim a space that is neither very public nor very private. Typologically, this space is tangled in an exchange between loggia, veranda, sun room, and studio. We continued to think about this part of the building once the deck chairs were decided on by extending the decking inside the house. This converted the studio floor into an element more like a mezzanine where Peter can easily talk from his studio to family in the spaces below (Figure 39). It seems to me these everyday activities, or regular practices, define the specific culture of this house. More than the rest of the building, this part of the house opens up possibilities for creative exchange in various forms.
The south elevation, particularly, reinforced our commitment to presenting both painting and architecture in the same elements, while ensuring those elements could not be fully explained by either painting or architecture on their own. By using the striped canvas we found an element that was very painterly, as an obvious invocation of Daniel Buren’s work (Figure 42). They read easily as a series of “paintings”, and were assumed to be the work of Buren himself in one online blog (Barr and Barr, 2011), but they were also in the end nothing more than a line of modest deck chairs (Figure 43). They fulfil a prosaic architectural role providing both seating and safety from falling off the edge of a veranda (Figure 41).

In this sense, and unlike Buren’s own work, the deck chairs exist in traditions of both architecture and painting. They appear from the street as a series of paintings on an architectural background and disappear behind the viewer when someone sits on the deck chairs to look at Peter’s paintings on the opposite wall. They flip from object to background, figure to ground, and architecture and painting.

Several things emerged from this case study. Firstly, my dialogue with Peter became an important part of the creative process. I discuss this in more detail in Chapter Two (page 184). Also, through our conversations, Peter has become part of the community around my practice. As I described in the introduction, to varying degrees, this has happened with other projects too, and these sustained relationships have naturally led to new projects (page 10). In this case, Peter and I have presented together on several occasions: at the Melbourne Art Fair (Kebbell and Adsett, 2014) and City Gallery Wellington (Kebbell and Adsett, 2015).
Figure 40. Oblique view of the canvas © Sonia Mangiapane (2010)
Figure 41. Looking along the upstairs veranda © Sonia Mangiapane (2010)
Figure 42. Daniel Buren, Within and Beyond the Frame (1973)
Figure 43. Deck chairs in Hyde Park
Figure 44. Dining and kitchen spaces. © Sonia Mangiapane (2010)
Secondly, the project is set within both particular and universal contexts. On one hand, Humbug is driven by the particular circumstance of a client-collaborator who is a painter and the particular architectural context of a local vernacular. On the other hand, it was driven by a resistance to separate painting and architecture that developed in the context of some principles of figure and ground. These principles within our respective traditions could be applied universally across a big group of projects and situations, beyond the particularities of this house and studio.

Finally, Humbug exploits double readings to collapse possible interpretations onto each other. In the project, we self-consciously engage architectural traditions like the Australian veranda, the striped canvas awnings, the plinth, the board and batten, and so on. But in each case, those traditions are turned toward traditions in painting, like the veranda seats for looking in not out, canvas presented as a Buren-like installation, the plinth that is also a giant horizontal surface for the painter to make his mark, and the pushing and pulling of black and white lines that happens in the board and batten. Double readings like these are a tactic to collapse any possible hierarchies between rarefied traditions of painting and common traditions of vernacular architecture. One association collapses onto another, and this tactic emerged in subsequent case study projects too.
A Quite Simple House

This project began soon after the Ph.D. research began. It is a house in PekaPeka, which is a beach side community about one hour’s drive from Wellington. By the time I was commissioned, I had begun my case study on Humbug, and I was able to work on the project with a new sense of self-consciousness. The patterns I explained in the Humbug case study emerged again, but I gleaned new insights too. The house explores both possibilities of affordable construction techniques, and qualities of monumentality, particularly through a veranda around the outside of the house, but the process also revealed a certain sensitivity to materials.

Figure 46. Quite Simple House. South elevation. © Martha Stunt (2015)
The site is a grassy five-acre section amongst the parabolic dunes about 800m back from the west facing the beach (Figure 49), and my client is a fanatical gardener. From the front and top section of the highest dune there are attractive views over the sea to Kapiti Island, and my client quite quickly placed a bench seat there to enjoy the views when she wasn’t working in the garden (Figure 48). However, this seat was also overlooked by the neighbour’s house which claimed its half of the same dune to capture the same views. This part of the site was more exposed to the onshore winds than any other. Behind this large dune is a sunny and sheltered hollow (Figure 47), which would once have been swampy wetland before it was drained to make way for agriculture. While this hollow was not a good site for the house, it was an obvious place to develop a vegetable garden.
Figure 49. Location on the Kapiti Horowhenua Coast (2014)
Figure 50. Series of building location studies (2013)
(Figure 50) In these experiments, I explored the possible relationships between the house and the dune.

(Figure 51) In the end the house became a link between the high vantage point and the protected area behind.
Alongside my study of the siting options (Figure 50), I explored formal ideas too. My first sketches assumed the house would incorporate a pathway of some kind to connect the exposed seat with great views to the sheltered garden behind. This pathway would naturally spiral down and around the dune from the seat to the vegetable garden behind. My inclination towards the pathway was supported by my case study on the veranda at Humbug and the pathway at the Great Barrier house, which I explain in a later case study. All the sketches were built up from repetitive elements. Initially, these elements iteratively rotated as they negotiated the spiral path to expose a changing view along the route. This intuition was an appealing starting point, but I was also conscious of a tight budget and my client’s predisposition towards maximising the amount of space for the money spent. I, therefore, made corrective sketches to develop geometries which would be simpler and cheaper to build. The repetitive elements arranged in simple and cost effective geometries at Humbug gave me confidence that the paring back could work.
Figure 54. Concept elevation studies (2013)
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Figure 55. Concept plan for feasibility study
Figure 56. Concept elevation for feasibility study
During the first revision of the concept design, I reflected the stepping down of the floor plates in section with offsets of the screen panels in plan. This was an attempt to soften the edge of the house and create opportunities for entry. At the same time, I initially imagined the screen in a perforated or expanded mesh which would be only semi-opaque, something similar to the New Museum in New York by SANAA (Figure 59). Because this material was too expensive I explored more prosaic materials, but initially in more complex configurations. With my client's enthusiasm for gardening, it occurred to me that the screen could incorporate, or even be fully composed of long planter boxes (Figure 56). Planter boxes are often considered part of a kitsch vernacular but I was excited about the possibility of seeing them on a large scale in a big landscape. I was quite self-consciously pursuing an element with modest origins that could be used to powerful effect, similar to the relationship between vernacular deck chairs and Daniel Buren at Humbug. The planter boxes felt stronger than the more derivative mesh, and would have been much cheaper, but my client was not interested. It seemed technically fiddly to her, and not the kind of gardening she imagined.
Figure 58. Quite Simple House Concept Model, Dec 2013
Figure 59. SANAA, New Museum in New York (2007) © Julien Lanoo
Figure 60. Study of floor levels in longitudinal section (2013)
The floor level heights would remain a central issue to enable a manageable transition from the high side of the dune to the low side, and a car garage needed to be incorporated too. The first iteration of an orthogonal scheme placed the garage on the corner which established a more or less fixed height there. This suggested a level platform facing the sea and connecting to the high side of the dune, and several floor levels stepping down gradually towards the vegetable garden behind it, all covered by a single large roof.

Figure 61. Study of floor levels in transverse section (2013)
Figure 62. Screen study renders (2013)
These levels created a relatively high sub-floor space, especially around the garage, and it was clear to me that the means for enclosing this sub-floor would be critical to the design development. As I was doing this, I had already revealed the disproportionate amount of time spent on the south elevation at Humbug with the deck chairs and battens, and I immediately suspected this screen would be its equivalent. The Ph.D. had clearly begun to impact on my practice already.

The planter boxes in the concept design were abandoned but I then explored the possibilities of horizontal timber boards that I planned to make them with. The same boards are commonly used for suburban boundary fences (Figure 63). This also had a vernacular appeal, and my client liked it, but I quite quickly found problems with it. Cladding the whole house in timber was likely to be too expensive, so the boards would only make a ‘boundary fence’ around the house with minimal visual connection to the house itself (Figure 64). It made better sense to clad the house in fibre cement board that could also be used for the soffit. I then began experiments with a cement board screen that would enable a continuous system across all the vertical surfaces and the soffit (Figure 62). This gave the simple material some visual strength.
Figure 65. Working drawings of the perimeter screen (2013)
Most of the house was detailed quite casually, except the screen around the perimeter and the adjacent cladding with was carefully controlled and precisely drawn. This 1:20 model was produced as a study of the panel details, and to help my client visualise the details in question.
Throughout these experiments, I always included an expressed timber frame that defined the pathway around the outside edge of the house: the west and south perimeter. It was not always roofed and it was set out in various configurations as the design developed. With the introduction of the cement board panels, though, it made sense to set the frames out at regular intervals consistent with one of the proprietary sheet sizes which are 2.4, 2.7 and 3.0m lengths. I ultimately set up a regular grid at 2.7m centres (Figure 69), which was wide enough for the garage door and narrow enough for timber bearers to span economically.

The framework does not attempt to define the DNA of the house’s structural system. The 2.7m spacing between columns around the edge changes to a 1.2m grid at the house itself where the cement board sheets are fixed vertically. The 2.7m grid lines do not transfer to the structural lines of the main house either. Like Humbug, the framework around the edge does not capture a purist’s view of construction, nor structure, but it does provide a strong visual ordering device for the outside edge of the building.
Collapsing Hierarchies: Party Walls, the Rarefied, and the Common

**Figure 68.** Longitudinal section through south veranda (2013)

**Figure 69.** South elevation (2013)
1.2 Simple house

This Acceptable Solution is for a simple house that is defined as follows:

(a) single storey, stand-alone household unit in wind zones up to Very High (ie, 50 m/s (metres per second) maximum as per NZS 3604 Section 5), and

(b) maximum length or width of floor of 24.0 m including any attached garage, and

(c) simple plan shapes such as rectangular, L, T or boomerang, and

(d) concrete slab-on-ground or suspended timber floor on piles, and

(e) maximum height of 2.0 m from finished floor level to adjacent cleared ground level, and

(f) simple roof forms, incorporating hips, valleys, gables or mono pitches, but excluding any roof element finishing within the boundaries formed by exterior walls (eg, the lower ends of aprons, chimneys, dormers, clerestoreys, box windows, etc), and

(g) eaves with a minimum width of 450 mm or maximum width of 750 mm to all roofs, and

(h) maximum overall height of 7.0 m from roof apex from lowest cleared ground level, and

(i) maximum roof height 3.0 m, and

(j) roof slope between 10° and 35° from the horizontal, and

(k) maximum span of roof truss 12.0 m, and

(l) external walls maximum of 2.4 m height studs, other than gable end walls and walls to mono-pitched roofs that shall not exceed 4.0 m, and

(m) timber framing, as specified in this Acceptable Solution, and

(n) the combination of a maximum of two wall cladding types, and

(o) aluminium exterior joinery, except for attached garage doors, and

(p) no building element, such as eaves, located less than 650 mm from any site boundary.

Like the south facade at Humbug, this outside edge of the building consumed a disproportionate amount of design time. The geometric frame, pathway, and perimeter screen go a long way towards defining the character of the house. There were many design iterations and long discussions over very small details along this edge, and other parts of the house were not subjected to the same scrutiny.

Throughout the design development, and reinforced by cost estimates from the Quantity Surveyor, I became increasingly interested in a 202-page prescriptive design document (Figure 71) produced by the Department of Building and Housing called the “Simple House Acceptable Solution” (2010). The document begins with a sixteen-point definition of a Simple House (Figure 70) that sets a relatively low technical bar. This house met twelve of the sixteen criteria, making it a Quite Simple House.

The document contains details and specifications for commonly used materials which meet the building code, like cement board sheet, and many of the details in the house could be drawn from this document. The idea of a Quite Simple House was being widely discussed in public media throughout the design process by another name, the Affordable House, and I began to relish the typological possibilities of the project.
Early in the process, when the perimeter frame first emerged, I also showed my client some images of the columns at Norman Foster’s Carré d’Art in Nîmes (Figure 72). I have always admired this project, particularly the columns and their relationship to the adjacent Roman building. As the logic of the Quite Simple House emerged I enjoyed this connection to Foster more and more.

There was an ambiguity between the very modest Quite Simple House and the columnar allusion to monumentality captured by Foster. The monumentality seemed to strengthen when it was wrapped in a single white material. It occurred to me that in this contemporary economy of inequality and unaffordable housing, the Quite Simple House is precisely the building type that ought to be monumentalised.
Figure 74. Looking south along veranda. © Martha Stunt (2014)
As another strategy to help keep costs down, my client, who is a retired wedding dress designer from London, was heavily involved in the delivery process. She brought an enormous amount to the project through the design development stages too: she was a big driver of the simplicity of the building and she had a wonderfully particular view of the colour white, which she tested scrupulously, and there are many other examples of her important contribution. The collaboration was very productive even where there are differences in opinion. There are details I designed that she doesn’t like, the top rail to the balustrade for example, and there are a few decisions she made that I don’t like, such as the substitution of recycled plastic for timber decking. I made several attempts to persuade her otherwise, and I was disappointed when she went ahead with the substitution. This particular instance alerted me to the value of materials in my work at a point in my Ph.D. when I had started to assume otherwise. After my case study on Humbug, I began to think my use of prosaic materials like cement board sheet was because materiality was secondary. In fact that was an oversight. It matters very much, and this reminder was a significant moment in the research.
The regularity of columns helped conjure images of more monumental structures, but they also helped me imagine the building as part of a continuous system. Perhaps not on the grand scale of Superstudio, but as a prototype for occupying the surrounding landscape. Through work I had been doing with architecture and landscape students at the university I had become more mindful of the need to re-vegetate this land, and more pleased to be attached to my client’s planting project. Just as the regularity of columns made it easy to imagine the system popping up on neighbouring sites across the region, so too could I imagine other enthusiastic gardeners re-vegetating the whole region. The area is a popular place for retirees to devote their energy to landscapes of varying scales, and en masse it would be a wonderful contribution for a generation to make.

Figure 76. Looking along west elevation. © Martha Stunt (2014)
The Quite Simple House is located within an area recognised as optimal for native vegetation restoration.

**Figure 77.** Optimal revegetation areas, Kapiti-Horowhenua Coast. Drawing by Winston Dewhirst (2014)
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Figure 78. Looking north across veranda. © Martha Stunt (2014)
Figure 79. West facade. © Martha Stunt (2014)
Figure 80. South west corner. © Martha Stunt (2014)
This project confirmed many of the revelations of the Humbug case study, but it revealed new tendencies too. This house is a response to universal contexts: a deficit of affordable housing in New Zealand and a need to re-vegetate across the region. It also emerges from a particular context, the idiosyncrasies of my retired wedding dress designer and her passion for planting. The architectural language relies on common construction systems and common materials, but also alludes to more rarefied traditions of monumentality. The ambiguity between rarefied and common collapses any socially ascribed hierarchy between monuments and affordable housing. Again, the outside edge was the central protagonist in the narrative that emerged. The speculative nature of the narrative is more explicit in this project than Humbug, where it lies slightly under the surface. The geometric framework came forward more clearly in this project than it did at Humbug too, partly because more work was required to present a simple system on a sloping site. The importance of materiality emerged more strongly than I anticipated, particularly through the decking material, but also in the study that went from expanded mesh, to timber boards, to cement board sheet. That study of materiality also exposed my urge for replication, not just of a material, in this case across the screen, soffit, and wall cladding; but also of a scenario, in this case across the surrounding landscape.
Blue Basement

This is a 70m2 alteration to my own family's house in Wellington. The original house is a modest worker's cottage on a hill. We excavated underneath the house and extended the basement. Like Humbug and the Quite Simple House, the plan is very straightforward, but a great deal of attention was given to window composition and detailing the tile cladding. It is a precious basement for a modest house.
The site is exposed to both big weather and remarkable views. The original house was built soon after WWII. It was the first house on this site, located on a road made as part of a government scheme during the 1930’s Depression. It was common for local houses at the time to be built with a concrete perimeter wall around the sub-floor and basement with timber-framed upper storeys. The extension to the basement continues the concrete structural base and serves as a plinth for the upper level. Occupied primarily by bedrooms, it serves as a solid and intimate retreat from Wellington’s big weather, but it is also suspended over a garden below.

The outermost 1.5m of the basement is cantilevered and lifted a few hundred millimetres over the existing crib wall immediately underneath the addition, partly to avoid surcharging the existing structure, but also to present the new basements as a floating object above the lawn. Being both under the house and over the garden, the basement can be considered as both heavy and light. Heavy with respect to the house above and the experience of descending into a protective basement, and light with respect to the garden and the experience of a floating box high on a hill. After much deliberation about the exterior surfaces, we concluded on a light blue porcelain tile which is both heavy in its earthen materiality and a playful, light, sky blue.
Figure 84. Basement level plan (2012)
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Figure 85. View from North East. © Martha Stunt (2014)
In 1999, I edited a book of student essays from the Graduate School of Design called *The Harvard Farmer*, in which there was a memorable essay called *A Plinthology* (Ahleman, 2001). The essay considered the role of plinths in the development of modern architecture. Since then I have been more aware of the plinth, and this was an obvious opportunity to consider the possibilities of an 'elevated plinth'.

*Another collapsing hierarchy*
Figure 87. View from South East. © Martha Stunt (2014)
Figure 88. East elevation (2014)
Figure 89. North wall and view harbour behind. © Martha Stunt (2014)
Much of New Zealand’s building stock is relatively young and low quality. Basements provide a good opportunity to upgrade it from the bottom up. The need to do so enters the public discourse from time to time, usually in response to various ‘crises’. The question of density is often raised with respect to both environmental and affordability crises (Figure 208 on page 196). Planning regulations and property prices in London have incentivised widespread development of basements there and development of basements on Wellington’s hillsides could dramatically intensify its building stock. Not only could it increase net floor area per hectare, but it could be the basis of a much more nuanced relationship with the ground we build on. It could be said that in a country with such a rich topography as ours, we should have as many words for ‘ground’ as the inuit have for ‘snow’. Perhaps we ought to have the range of basement types to match.

This project developed over a long period of time, and was in progress alongside the Quite Simple House. Like many other architects’ homes, it remains in progress. Again, there is an ambiguity between rarefied and common architectural expression in this case study: in the fine tile cladding for an extension to the basement, which is usually an uncelebrated necessity. This ambiguity is reinforced by the ambiguity of a base for the (future) object above it, and the box elevated above the garden below. The concentration on detailing and composition of the openings in the main facade is also consistent with my fascination with one or two walls of a project, and the central role of materiality here underscores my observations of the Quite Simple House. The geometries of the Blue Basement are not expressed as a separate framework as they are in the previous case studies, but the geometry imposed by the tile dimension is carefully honoured by the window composition. The use of a modular element, evident in Humbug and the Quite Simple House, is central to the following two case studies of workplace interiors at slightly different scales.
Resn, with no i

In 2010 we designed the office fit-out for Resn, the web design company that produced KebbellDaish's own first website. It is a 400m² floor in central Wellington that was once ad hoc loft accommodation for students and the venue for some memorable parties that our clients and we attended as students. We set out to recall some of that casual domestic atmosphere, combined with a museum-like reverence for a growing collection of artefacts gathered by Resn. We explored this domestic atmosphere, and this reverence, through a single modular wall-type that would divide the main areas of the office.
Materiality became an important aspect of this project too. It did not begin with a major concern for material, but that became an important part of the investigation. More important initially, was Resn's growing collection of mostly very ordinary but delightful objects accumulated from second-hand stores, donations, gifts, friends, family, trips away, and a stack of trophies they had won. The objects are mostly quite domestic sorts of things: video games, packaging, concert posters, old reading lamps, and books. Some are workplace collector items, like the early Macintosh computer monitors. The new office needed to accommodate all of them.
Figure 92. Image collection from previous offices. (2010)
Figure 93. Robot Combination game (2010)
Figure 94. Glasses (2010)
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Figure 95. Received plan from landlord. (2010)
Figure 96. Floor plan (2010)
The project was being paid for by the new landlord who would also act as the main contractor. Predictably, he was only inclined to pay for what he called a ‘normal fit-out’ and he provided a crude sketch of how he envisaged it to work. In response to this constraint, we asked our Quantity Surveyor to provide a Rough Order of Cost for a ‘normal fit-out’ based on the landlord’s sketch, bearing in mind this was a central city office with good views over the harbour. The landlord agreed with the assumptions made and a budget was set accordingly. Rather than the eight walls allowed for in the budget, we proposed just three walls, but more intricately made than a ‘normal’ wall.
Figure 97. Wall with objects and one shutter open. © Nicola Edmonds (2011)
We produced a small working model of an idea for this wall which would provide flexible meeting spaces, openings, and shelving for the collection of objects. The built form of the wall is not far from this initial model, but there was an extended study of its materiality.
Because of the budget pressure we were keen to explore cost-effective materials which might provide a sufficiently rich backdrop for the collection of objects. After briefly considering the option of making panels from discarded signs we had a chance conversation with a contractor who we had worked with previously. They had just finished a large project from which they had a stockpile of used plywood from the site hoarding and they offered it to us at no cost. Of course, it was too rough as we found it but we experimented with several ways of scorching the surface to literally burn off the blemishes, hoping to produce something like the charred boards used in Asia for cladding.

After a series of naive attempts with a pizza oven, methylated spirits, and wood shavings did not produce a consistent or controllable burn, we found much more success with a gas torch which gave us a great deal more control. We charred a number of sheets like this and finished them with clear polyurethane and built a small section of wall as a prototype with the joiner. The result was very compelling and it gave a modest palette of plywood and pine timber framing a great deal of depth. Resn quite rightly asked questions of durability, concerned that the polyurethane would peel off in due course and be difficult to re-apply. Paint companies were not inclined to offer any guarantees about our proposal. Eventually, the charring fell into the too-hard basket but by then everybody was attached to the dark coloured plywood which was easily achieved, under warranty, with a proprietary stain.
Figure 99. Signs collage for Resn (2009)
Figure 100. Experiments charring plywood hoarding (2010)
Figure 101. Prototype with torched plywood panels (2010)
Figure 102. Prototype panel detail (2010)
Figure 103. Under construction (2010)
Figure 104. The ‘living’ room. © Nicola Edmonds (2011)
The colour and material palette did lend itself to the quasi-domestic atmosphere of its past. Resn’s directors and I both wanted to develop that atmosphere, so we also conceived the main shared spaces in domestic terms: a living room with sofas and screens, a large open planned kitchen, and a dining space with views over the harbour.

These spaces were established by the three main walls and occupied the centre of the floor. Each wall separated the three main groups of people in the office (directors, designers, and producers) but the walls also have opening sections to give each of those groups a view onto the shared spaces as they please. The opening sections convert into small tables for meetings and the display of larger objects.
Figure 107. Objects in the wall. © Nicola Edmonds (2011)
Figure 108. Part of the collection. © Nicola Edmonds (2011)
Despite being an interior project, the Resn office also launches from particular contexts: our student experiences, and their collection of bric-a-brac. It also develops in the context of offices like this all around the world blurring the boundaries between work and leisure: a universal context. While we self-consciously conceived the project to have a domestic connotation and to house Resn’s collection, once the project was finished it felt more like a museum space than a domestic one. It began in our minds as a home office, but it developed the feeling of an office museum. I have mentioned typologies in other case studies too (the classic Australian veranda at Humbug, the monumental collonades at the Quite Simple House, and the Blue Basement), but through this case study, I became more self-conscious of the capacity of building types to collapse hierarchies too: like that of an office and museum.
The process included the careful consideration of materials and the reductive geometry of a repeated module, and it establishes a similar dynamic to other case study projects: a rarefied museum and a common student loft, this time almost exclusively through a single wall.

In part, I developed this understanding through the process of preparing an element of the Resn wall for exhibition at the Situation 14 conference and exhibition at RMIT (Kebbell, 2014c). The section of Resn wall was fixed perpendicularly to the gallery wall, with fixed panels opening in each direction to form small tables like the folding table-shutters at Resn. Photos of the project were exhibited on the gallery wall, and photos of the design process including the early models and experiments with charred plywood were included in a small photo album available for visitors to peruse alongside working drawings. In the context of a large white-walled gallery space, the installation could have passed as a reception desk or information kiosk for the gallery: the Resn wall conflated ideas of an apartment, office, museum, and gallery.
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Figure 113. Donald Judd, Untitled (1981)
Figure 114. Framed view of interior of John Soane Museum in London installed in the exhibition.
Figure 115. Customised coffee mugs on display as part of the installation (2014)

Donald Judd, Untitled (1981)
Images of the John Soane Museum were included in the Situation 14 installation to allude to the house-museum type rather than the home-office type that we began with.

When we began working with plywood, we quickly turned to Donald Judd to remind ourselves of his careful detailing and subtle compositions. The balance of regular vertical lines and irregular horizontal ones was particularly relevant to us as the early model developed.

As I began to consider the Situation installation as a possible gallery reception desk, I also began to consider presenting it with merchandise: like a museum / gallery shop. As an icon of commercialisation, the Starbucks logo became the basis for the installation identity. I made half a dozen coffee cups with these stickers on them and displayed them on the shelves as if they might be for sale.
An Urban Caravan Park

Our first commission after forming our practice in 2002 was for the Wellington office of the global advertising agency, Saatchi & Saatchi. Largely as a defence against creative complacency, they wanted to change their offices and allow them to keep changing. We modelled our design on a caravan park such that offices can move freely around an open floor plate. Around the edge of the floor we made a ‘no-parking’ zone where people could meet and objects could be displayed.
The play between building types and context that lay beneath the Resn project is also evident in this project. Saatchi & Saatchi wanted to meet us after seeing our Great Egyptian Museum (GEM) project exhibited at City Gallery Wellington. Like Resn became, the GEM project was also a typological collage of house and museum.

Our client had dominated the advertising industry in New Zealand for more than fifteen years, and they had done so with very few changes amongst the twenty or so creatives in the Wellington based agency. People in the office tended to drink coffee at the same time of day, walk the same pathway to the kitchen, and meet the same people over lunch. The management team was concerned that this would extend to producing the same ads, campaign after campaign, and complacency was a competitive concern. So while they did not have any functional need to make changes to the office. That is, they weren’t expanding, contracting, or needing new facilities: they had a cultural imperative to change.

When we were commissioned, John and I were both flattered and surprised. We had no experience of commercial interiors at all. I had only really built small houses for family members and I did not feel particularly confident designing office furniture with any degree of technical or ergonomic sophistication. To support us, we asked an industrial design colleague of ours at VUW to collaborate. Ross Stevens, who worked for Philippe Starck as a young designer, is an enthusiast for the fabrication processes and well known for his work on a range of products from audio systems to his own house made from old shipping containers.
WHAT IS THE BRIEF FOR?
We are known as one of the most creative agencies in NZ and within the S&S network. The 4th floor has always been where the creative people sit and it also tends to be where the agency as a whole gathers to celebrate, socialise and play. It is the heart of the agency. When the 4th floor hums so does the rest of the agency, and vice versa. The physical space has changed very little in 10 years. It’s grown very comfortable and it feels pretty tired. Our concern recently has been how to fit people in rather than who should how the space could be used to maximise creative fertility. With the role of the Wellington office as the creative hub for S&S NZ, it’s time for a rethink and a revamp.
We want to reinvent the 4th floor as a space that is designed for ‘serious play’, that is a space dedicated to stimulating creativity.

- Perhaps we should have a variety of different collaborative spaces that can be really flexible so that they can change in mood and feel, and in size depending on how people feel and what they are doing. It feels as if the space should be constantly surprising and stimulating even for people who use it every day.
- We think it would be good for people to ‘own’ their individual working spaces so that they decide what the space will look like and how they will use it.
- We feel we need informal spaces that encourage people to hang out together to have a coffee, eat lunch, have a wine.
- Perhaps we should have a space specifically designed for play - a toy room?.
- We really like the idea of having as much flexibility as possible - e.g. spaces that can change shape/size/mood.

ANYTHING ELSE YOU WANT TO GET OFF YOUR MIND?
- We're not looking for a creative showcase, but for a working space. We don't (just) want it to look creative, but to be creative.
Figure 120. Previous offices (2003)
Figure 121. Previous offices (2002)
We ultimately proposed an office that could keep on changing. We demolished all of the existing interiors except for vertical circulation and plumbing infrastructure and installed a number of offices on wheels. Most creatives work in pairs, with one art director and one copywriter, and there are a few specialist creatives who plug-in to project teams as required. So we made large mobile offices for each creative pair, and smaller ones for each specialist. Each office had no floor or ceiling so they could all be serviced by the same fire and mechanical services systems, but each had their own built in desk and shelving system. Power, data and telephone connections were supplied through a single conduit which could be plugged into overhead sockets, very similar to the system used by caravan parks. Each office could be moved anywhere on the floor, except passed an overhead cable which stopped offices being pushed into the perimeter.
Figure 122. Ground floor plan (2003)
Hello.

This is not an ad agency.

It's a home away from home.

In fact it's lots of things.

a campsite.

a zoo.
a raceway.  

M*A*S*H.  

a drive in cinema.  

meals on wheels.  

and it's about making believe.  

It's the [new] 4th floor
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Figure 124. View of Queen’s chain. © Jono Rotman (2004)

Figure 125. Part of a 20,000 strong march against proposed foreshore and seabed legislation © Terry Coggan (2004)
In the context of the Foreshore and Seabed Act of 2004 which was being hotly debated in New Zealand as the project developed (Figure 125), we began calling the area around the edge of the office the ‘Queen’s Chain’. It occupied the prime real estate with good views soaked in sunlight and it was protected for communal use. The Queen’s Chain has become the pop cultural name for public ownership of land, one chain back from the coast, lakes, and rivers. In reality, according to our national museum, approximately 30% of the coast in New Zealand is not publicly accessible and the Queen’s Chain has more mythological status than legal, but the idea of sharing the most valuable recreational land is a widely cherished principle (Hickford, 2015). As well as providing a clear escape path in the event of a fire, the Queen’s Chain was a very useful space. It was intensively planned with shelves, TV and video stations, meeting tables, display units, a bar and a kitchen.
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Figure 127. Interior view. © Jono Rotman (2004)
Figure 128. Interior view. © Jono Rotman (2004)
Figure 129. Prototype of office under construction (2004)
Figure 130. Prototype of acoustic wall panel under construction (2004)
Figure 131. Single office first iteration render (2003)
Figure 132. Double office first iteration render (2003)
Figure 133. Various images on the sides of offices (2004)
Figure 134. Interior view. © Jono Rotman (2004)
Figure 135. View into single office. © Jono Rotman (2004)
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Figure 136. Folding table as display. © Jono Rotman (2004)
Figure 137. Folding table with paper roll © Jono Rotman (2004)
Figure 138. Interior view. © Jono Rotman (2004)

Figure 139. Overhead utilities connections © Jono Rotman (2004)
The furniture in the Queen’s Chain, and the offices themselves, were made very crudely. Several of the components, like the stools and shelving systems, were proprietary industrial products from a local hardware store (Figure 143). Panels on the walls of the offices were lined in printed Tyvek, the material used to make disposable hats and overalls (Figure 142). Despite the likelihood that Saatchi & Saatchi could have afforded much more refined systems, it was important to them that the result was not slick. They wanted the office to feel much more like an artist’s studio than the set for Mad Men. It was fundamentally a place for creative production. In their own words declared in the brief, “We’re not looking for a creative showcase, but for a working space. We don’t (just) want it to look creative, but to be creative” (Figure 119 on page 121).
Figure 141. Interior view of googleplex
Figure 142. Fabric used for printing images on panels around each mobile office
Figure 143. Industrial shelving used in Queen’s chain
Figure 144. Organisational model (2004)
While the floor regularly played host to a notable tradition of advertising industry parties supported by the in-house band, “Din” (with the tagline, ‘something different in the age of variety’), the creative work mostly demanded quiet retreat. Mobile offices gave each creative a home base. They were places to surround themselves with personal things: books, notes, photographs, and posters that made it their own. The images printed on the outside walls of each office were produced by each occupant and easily changed with a staple gun.

This personal attachment to a workspace was a quality that ‘hot desks’, though fashionable at the time, could not achieve. Because these offices all moved to give occupants different neighbours, views, proximity to light, and so on, each office was very much like a caravan: a ‘home away from home’. It was a typological association which made sense of their work habits which, we learned early on in the process, often involved retreating to a coastal holiday house when the pressure came on. The office was a place to meet and socialise, but the beach was where the real work got done.

(Figure 144) After the project was complete and we had helped with the office re-shuffle on several occasions, we made this scale model to help plan the organisation of the floor before each move.
Like the Resn project, this is a playful workplace that also emerges from the context of creative workspace blurring boundaries between work and leisure, with drums and turntables included. Saatchi & Saatchi have a proud reputation, and part of the playfulness lies in the modest associations of caravans and artists studios as the home for a powerful global advertising agency. The hierarchy between worlds collapse in this project, as they have in other projects. The photographs with sheep extend the playfulness and the collapse of hierarchies further. The playfulness is partly for its own sake, but like Resn, it is also part of the management style and operation of the office, and a potential model for swathes of the creative city.
This is an embedded video clip. Click to begin.
Remote / Control

Great Barrier Island is in the Hauraki Gulf, about 100km north-east of Auckland. It is a little over 40km long and there are slightly less than 1000 permanent residents on the island. Around 60% of its total area is administered as a nature reserve by the Department of Conservation. We were asked to design a small house on a 70-acre section of land about half way up the island. The house is an attempt to capture the satisfaction of retreating from urban life and its luxuries, but also to take advantage of the spatial and sculptural opportunities presented by an extraordinary site. The key to our approach was the pathway that leads to the house and is planned to go onward into the rest of the site.
The Saatchi & Saatchi situation was unusual in that the coast was a place to retreat for work. It is more common to retreat from work, and this was certainly the agenda behind the house we designed on Great Barrier Island. When John and I first visited the site we spent a day bashing our way through the dense bush on about one-third of the property nearest to the road. It was difficult to get oriented and we spent some time trying to understand the property boundaries. Later that evening, the publican in our hotel explained where we had been and how to get to the other two-thirds of the property - a big valley out of view from where we had been. The ridge line that separates that big valley from the front section of the site is the first moment where the views open up of this big valley with mountains behind it. On the other side of the ridge line was a patch of bare land where the regenerating bush was struggling to take hold. It made sense to site the house on this bare patch of ground, despite the difficulties of getting to it. There was an opportunity to open up views of the whole property, enjoy a northerly aspect, and build without disturbing established bush while helping the bush take hold on the land below the house in the process. As we knew from our first day, it was difficult to walk through the bush without cutting a path along the way, so it was also clear that not only would a pathway to the house site be required for construction, but visitors would rely on pathways to explore the extraordinary property beyond the house.
Figure 149. Damaged ground immediately above the building site (2004)
Figure 150. Regenerating bush on site (2004)
Figure 151. Building site (2004)
Figure 152. View to west from building site (2004)
Figure 153. Map of Great Barrier Island and Auckland © Auckland City Council (2016)
Figure 154. Aerial photograph of site © Auckland City Council (2016)
We imagined developing a network of pathways throughout the site which connected the house to a number of small cabins, and a small studio gallery, which we called the ‘repository’. The site we had found was at the narrowest point of the property which meant that any pathway to the big valley would need to pass through, or very near to it, and we began to think of it as a ‘gatehouse’ for the remainder of the property.

The pathway was a crucial piece of infrastructure for the project. Pathways through spectacular native bush are a crucial piece of infrastructure for our national parks too (Figure 155). But in the national parks, the pathways work hard to avoid any visual contact with the huts those pathways connect. Huts are often painted green and sited on a separate pathway off the main track so hikers not needing a hut can walk on blissfully unaware of the architectural intervention (Figure 157).

There is an understandable assumption that architectural interventions spoil the environment and should be camouflaged as much as possible. On some occasions when the hut is primarily for safety, pragmatism trumps scenic protection and the hut is painted bright orange so it can be easily found by hikers in bad weather (Figure 156). It is rare for architecture and the pathway to be well integrated and part of a complementary aesthetic system; an aesthetic that would capture the kind of integration some people might consider vital to environmental sustainability. We set out then, to bring the pathway and the architecture together.
Figure 155. Typical walking track, Abel Tasman National Park

Figure 156. Orange hut

Figure 157. Green hut

Figure 155. Typical walking track, Abel Tasman National Park
(Figure 158) Our client was based overseas, so much of our communication was through a website. As we approached the building contract, we prepared a summary website that included this diagram recapping the idea of a triangulated geometry as an approach to camouflage and sculptural form. This set of annotated images were presented on that website (Figure 158-Figure 161).

**Figure 158.** Online presentation of triangulated surfaces of house and landscape (2007)
The project is to be developed over a period of roughly 20 years with the objective of creating a collection of buildings: some communal, some private.

The first objective is to complete the 'gatehouse' (1) with the necessary landscape and pathway work to provide access. The gatehouse is a place of arrival and welcome. It is where the main valley of the site opens up to view for the first time and can operate as a hub for the domestic facilities and accommodation on the site. This site is on the north side of a secondary ridgeline with great views to Awana and shelter from the South-Eastern winds.

The second objective is to build the 'depot' (2) to store equipment, vehicles, bulky supplies, machinery etc in addition to some simple accommodation for use when necessary.

(Figure 159) The summary website also explained our proposed staging of the developing on site. We referred to the immediate project as the 'gatehouse' because of its location on at the elbow of the site, and we proposed a building at the carpark location to follow (2).
The third stage we proposed was a small building in the base of the valley called the ‘repository’ which we imagined as an artists studio and small gallery.
With the infrastructure all in place, we proposed that ultimately we could build a network of ‘star beds’ or very simple cabins for guests to stay in around the property, connected by a growing network of paths.
Figure 162. Plan of restored driveway, depot, and walking track to gatehouse (2007)

Figure 163. Typical Zig-Zag path, Wellington
It was relatively straightforward to develop a driveway from the road along the first section of the property so vehicles could get to the first ridge line, but the path from there needed to be narrower to avoid making major excavations which would breach environmental regulations. We envisaged the pathway meeting the house and then zigzagging down the hill below the house, on the bare land, and then traversing the hill further into the valley.

(Figure 163) Zigzag pathways are a familiar part of the New Zealand urban landscape, particularly in my home town Wellington, which is a hillside city.
Figure 164. Landscape plan (2011)
Figure 165. Water management system (2007) Drawing by Wraight & Associates.
(Figure 165) The zigzag pathway could also provide a structure to hold a filtration system for water from the house that would support plant growth and ultimately help regenerate the bush on that bare ground.
(Figure 168) The pathway helped establish a strong link to the landscape around the house, but it also offered a formal language which could extend upwards from the pathway and into the house itself. The timber screens surrounding the zigzag rise up from the pathway in the form of a sun and wind screen and onto the front section of the roof.
Figure 169. Detail of the zigzag pathway with wind and sun screen. © Simon Wilson (2010)
The triangulated geometry across both the house and pathway produced a sculptural object on one hand, and a form of camouflage on the other. The triangulation produced a degree of sculptural flexibility which, because of the flat planes guaranteed by triangulation, could be made with traditional timber building techniques. We were interested in formal precedents like the Yokohama terminal building (1995), but the low-tech construction techniques available to us on the island. We used the geometric flexibility to bend the house around the contours of the hill and open up two sections of the roof to let in natural light to the kitchen and bathroom below. But regulations demanded a discrete formal approach, and the triangulation also played down the sculptural form. I discuss this regulation more in Chapter Two (page 196). Like the dazzle camouflage on navy boats in WWII (Figure 177 on page 167), the triangulation produces the effect of an object with ambiguous depth and, from a distance, the timber screens begin to read like a continuation of the ground surface below the house.
Figure 173. Preliminary design sketch from north west (2006)
Figure 174. Preliminary design model (2005)
Figure 175. Preliminary design sketch from north east (2006)
Figure 176. Preliminary design model (2005)
Figure 177. WWI Dazzle boat
Chapter One: Discovering Projects

Figure 178. First concept model, view of pathway (2006)
Figure 179. First concept model, view from above (2005)
(Figure 179) The first plan and concept model, based on scant topographical information, assumed a very simple geometry, but the realities of a complex topography forced a more complex one.
(Figure 184) The zigzag and the bending plan began to fit the house more closely to the contours of the hill.

(Figure 185) Much of the time in design development was spent shaping the geometry to the contours, and trying to maintain some formal clarity.
Figure 185. Geometric markups for landscape architect (2005)
Figure 186. Sketch of potential landscape treatment (2005)
Figure 187. Adjustments to wetlands geometry (2007)
Chapter One: Discovering Projects

Figure 188. Study of ‘Nothing’ billboards as doors (2006)

Figure 189. Nothing, 33 Billboards, Auckland City © Fiona Jack (1997)

Study of ‘Nothing’ billboards as doors (2006)
During design development, we decided to substitute the conventional glazed door joinery around the main living space to a sliding fabric door system with those on the side of Coca-Cola delivery trucks (Figure 193). The first idea was to re-use the billboard from this mock campaign by Auckland artist, Fiona Jack (Figure 189).

We also explored coloured fabric, and various configurations of clear and opaque fabric, before going ahead with the most simple version (Figure 191).
Collapsing Hierarchies: Party Walls, the Rarefied, and the Common

Figure 194. Arrival pathway meeting living space. © Simon Wilson (2010)

Figure 195. Interior of main living space looking across pathway. © Simon Wilson (2010)
I produced this drawing as part of the reflection on this project, and presented it in my PRS 2 presentation. Read in conjunction with the plan, it shows the triangulated surfaces rising up around the path and over the roof of the house, and the relationship between the pathway and the living room. This kind of relationship between landscape and architecture could contribute to the repertoire of formal relationships between architecture and landscape, particularly in our national parks which we experience primarily through the walking track and the hut.
Figure 198. Exploded axonometric (2008)
Like the other case study projects, this house begins with particular circumstances: a large site, sensitive landscape, and the need for an extensive pathway. But it also emerges in the context of all walkways in our national parks, a New Zealand-wide aesthetic bias of planning regulations both begin to inform the design process, and software developments making geometries like these much more simple to document. Out of the overlaps in these particular and universal contexts we self-consciously explored a rarefied architectural language of part camouflage and part sculptural flamboyance that was informed by international precedents and fitting, we thought, for a spectacular island retreat. At the same time, the house is small, and the main living spaces are enclosed with what amounts to a tent wall. There are many luxurious holiday homes on the island, but luxury was not the intent here. It could not be described as a ‘common’ house, but the tent walls usually used on Coca-Cola trucks, the small scale, and integrated zigzag pathway appeal to certain ideas that are. There is an attempt to make this unique experience a grounded one.

In Chapter One, with these six case studies, I have explained a selection of projects, aspects of their particular and universal contexts, and the rarefied and common forms of expression that collapse onto each other in each. I have also explained significant moments in the design process. In Chapter Two, I elaborate on my methods by explaining the roles of conversation, conjecture, connection, and conflation: what I call cons of the practice.
Chapter Two: Cons of the Practice

The central focus of each project described Chapter One ranges from architectural ideas about painting, the Queen’s chain, and affordable house regulations, to office-museums and walking tracks. The aim of this chapter is to look across the projects and explain the practice as a whole. To do this, I have explored ideas through formal and informal dialogue with supervisors and peers, developed diagrams that capture my approach to practice, and analysed the dialogues and diagrams to extract knowledge of particular techniques in my practice. I found that techniques I used in the Ph.D. research correspond closely to the techniques I use in practice. Here I explain how I rely on formal and informal conversation to explore connections, make conjectures, and conflate all this on the edges of a project.
All of these case study projects rely on both particular and universal contexts. The particular circumstances of a site and client, and the universal conditions of disciplinary principles, economic and demographic pressures, ecologies, technologies, and regulations. There is no attempt to privilege the particular over the universal, rather, the project emerges from the overlaps between them. These overlaps are materialised in both rarefied and common forms of expression. Sculptural flamboyance and truck sides on Great Barrier Island, for example, or iconic precedents and the local vernacular at Humbug, relatively precious materials and uncelebrated typologies in the Blue Basement, and so on. There is a similar dynamic in the mobile offices and industrial materials at Saatchi & Saatchi, and between the monumentality and simple construction of the Quite Simple House. The forms of expression and the contexts are different in each project, but the processes of each project are quite consistent. They all start with a conversation.

It is appropriate then, that my methods in practice are also explained through conversation. You will learn more about my interviewer, Arthur Wallace, in Chapter Three. For now, it is enough to know that I have known him a long time, he has been a part of several of my business ventures at various times, and in this study of my creative practice, he is well placed to lead the discussion.
Conversation

Arthur Wallace (AW): You gave a talk last year with Peter Adsett called Humbug: A Dialogue between Painting and Architecture. It seems to me, dialogue – in its various spoken, written, and visual forms – is a big part of what you do when you design. Perhaps especially in the project with Peter. Can you tell me a bit about how that particular conversation started?

SK: When Peter and Suzie commissioned their house in Shoreham after several years of our talking about architecture and painting, I went to stay with them for a few days and we began to develop the framework for our dialogue about the building. After several days talking, I proposed that we didn’t build on a large square at the centre of the site and that Peter could treat that space as a site for large-scale ‘painting’. The building could then be at the back of the site, and be considered a part of the frame for the square ‘painting’ (Figure 13). In this way, the house would be an extension of the perimeter fence, and we could of course paint the fence.

AW: So you began by down-playing architecture and privileging painting?

SK: It was less about down-playing architecture, than trying to make sure that painting was an important part of the project from the beginning. Neither of us wanted painting to be something that would be applied towards the end of the process. The fence and the square opened up discussions about figure and ground that were fascinating to both of us, initially for different reasons. Conventional figure-ground drawings of urban fabric show building as black/figure and not-building as white/ground. Painting, though, is normally understood as the figure (a painted canvas, say) on an architectural background, normally a white wall. If the ‘painting’ (square at the centre of the site) becomes the ‘figure’ (because we consider it painting) then we can consider the building as part of its frame, or ‘ground’ (like the white wall or frame in a gallery). But also, like I explained in the case study in Chapter One, that same square of land works like a plinth for the house that sits on it like a sculptural object. So, we can think of the square of land as ‘figure’ and the house itself as the ‘ground’, but we can also think about it the other way around. We were both interested in setting up this kind of ambiguity between painting and architecture: a place where we could really experience the dialogue between painting and architecture.

Figure 200. Peter Adsett, Taint (2010)
AW: You said figure and ground was fascinating to you for different reasons. What was the difference?

My thinking was based on the conventions of figure and ground in architecture, but for Peter, as a painter, ‘figure’ and ‘ground’ refer to the perception of foreground and background as a viewer might experience it. He was interested in how colour and material can push and pull a surface to give a surface depth or collapse three-dimensions into two. Our different understandings of figure and ground as urban fabric on one hand, and perception of surface and space on the other triggered some confusing conversations at the beginning but the overlaps and differences became the focus of our conversation as the project developed and for years to follow.

AW: How did you manage these different perspectives?

SK: We concluded early on, that for a successful project we would each need the power of veto over the other. We didn’t want me to operate as a painter in an architectural project, or Peter to work as an architect. That would be a lowest common denominator collaboration, instead, we both stuck to our respective disciplines. Through dialogue, we found solutions that made sense from our respective positions, and established a dialogue between them.

AW: That sounds pretty special. Peter is a great painter, and he’s an intellectual. He finished his Ph.D. by practice in painting only a few years ago. What happens when your client doesn’t have a Ph.D. and you can’t make esoteric art making practices the central theme of a conversation?

SK: Well, obviously not all conversations are that intense, that specialised, or span more than a decade as the one I continue with Peter has, but conversations of all kinds can reveal something valuable about a project. It was a passing conversation where I learnt that most of the key creatives at Saatchi & Saatchi retreated to coastal holiday homes when the pressure came on, which provided an attractive connection between its staff and the idea of an ‘urban caravan park’. And not all of the crucial conversations are with a client either. It was our conversation with the publican on Great Barrier Island that alerted us to two-thirds of the site and led to our integration of the all-important walking track.
Figure 201. Wayne, the publican, leading us to far section of the site at Great Barrier Island (2004)
Chapter Two: Cons of the Practice

AW: OK, so all kinds of conversations can reveal something about the project, but why are you so interested in conversation as a way to do that? You could discover something interesting about a project by looking at a map too, couldn’t you? Or some old photographs?

SK: I suppose so, but conversations are very personal. A map, or photograph, or something like that could be personal, but more often they are slightly removed. Conversation is a good way for me to find out about how people engage with the situation we are building in. I don’t always rely on just one comment, but sometimes a string of comments or combination of situations that start to form my understanding of the culture of a place (Eagleton, 2000). Conversation helps me get a feel for the building, you know, whether it should be serious, playful, precious, or something else. For example, our shared memories of student parties at the Resn site and Resn’s collection of very personal objects both provided personal connections to the idea of a house-museum for an office. The Quite Simple House, which is all white, developed from conversations about our client’s career as a wedding dress designer and her genuine fascination with the colour white to the extent she had developed her own formula for a particular white paint. In both those cases, something distinct came out of informal discussions. It’s different to a formal briefing, or ‘research’ about a project. It’s less structured, but as a result, I find I’m more likely to stumble on something very specific that will drive the project.

AW: You stumble on something? You make it sound opportunistic.

SK: Yes, it is a little opportunistic. Each project has its own particular circumstances: the people, place, timing, neighbours, and so on. Personal conversations around a project help tease these idiosyncrasies out. Whether or not it is from a passing comment or years of dialogue, the conversations start to form the character of a project based on real connections to people. Those connections are personal and they have been discovered or tested in conversation. They are not imposed on a project from the outside. The dialogue about figure and ground began to articulate something really important to Peter and his work. It is not a discussion I could have had with any other client. Our conversation with the publican on Great Barrier Island began to make sense out of the very point of our client owning this plot of land: planning regulations on the island preclude subdivision, farming, or really anything other than recreational use that allows the bush to regenerate. The point of owning the land then, is to walk through the bush and whistle with the birds, which is impossible in the dense bush without a pathway. We figured if a pathway is fundamental to the motivations, then it ought to be fundamental to the house. The pathway could also be central to the architectural expression. Conversations like these establish a way into the project at a personal level.
AW: I can see it is a way to address the motivations of the owner, sure. But architecture is, or should be, more than mere satisfaction of middle-class motivations to build.

SK: It is always a fine balance between developing a project that is sufficiently personal, utterly fits a client, but also satisfies other agendas.

AW: Go on.

SK: Our office has always been small, and our projects bespoke. We have not been building for a general public or large organisations. Since 2002 we have worked with less than forty clients but many of them have become close friends, and some of them, mentors.

AW: And you’ve been fired a couple of times.

SK: True, and we’ve fired a few clients too, I’m not pretending to be universally loved. But making strong connections at this personal level has been important to my motivation, and part of the quality of projects themselves.

AW: You still haven’t answered my question. That’s great for your clients, but this highly personalised approach also pushes your practice into the luxury commodity market: a bespoke house or office to go with a client’s bespoke wardrobe and luxury car. Shouldn’t architecture also make some kind of cultural contribution?

SK: Of course, I fear the architecture of pure hedonism too. Tailoring as a form of pampering can degenerate very quickly, but I have always tried to go beyond that luxury market in various ways. Most of our clients share some kind of distaste for the luxury market too, and they often embrace, occasionally even push for, connections to a bigger context. So these personal conversations are best when they are part of a public conversation too.

AW: Indeed. Are the motivations behind personal and public conversations similar?

They are obviously different in lots of ways because of the scale of each kind of conversation, but at one level they are very similar. Personal conversations make a project ‘real’ in an intimate sense: something that individuals, including myself, can identify with very directly. Public conversations also make a project ‘real’ but in the sense that it might matter to more than just a few individuals: public conversations are part of a universal context for a project. These public conversations are not about a particular project. They are part of the context for all projects in the same situation.

“Of course, and I fear the architecture of pure hedonism too.”
Figure 203. Cover, Urbis, Issue 91 April 2016
Chapter Two: Cons of the Practice

Figure 204. Oral presentation, Situation 14 conference and exhibition © Ramesh Ayyar
Figure 205. Oral Presentation PRS 6 in Barcelona (2015)
Figure 206. Arranging the Deck Chairs in conversation with Dr. Marcelo Stamm Brussels, (2014)
Interlude on Method, Part I:

Research by Conversation

Like my building projects normally do, this Ph.D. progressed through a series of conversations too. Through them, my supervisors, peers, critics and I have uncovered qualities, related architects, omissions, and potential lines of inquiry. The Practice Research Symposia (PRS) have provided a formal structure for those conversations, and how they work has been described thoroughly elsewhere (Van Schaik et al., 2011). The conversations take many forms and the reflection has happened with an eye to past, present, and future of my practice.

Set piece conversations, like writing, lecturing, and public speaking, are something quite different to the informal conversations. The back of a napkin and yarn at the bar is a very fluid form of conversation. Topics arrive, turn, leave, and overlap in ways that are normal for conversation but can make disorienting reading or listening. Writing and lecturing have been valuable ways to develop in-depth conversations and test ideas that might have had more informal beginnings. They might have their practice equivalent in a set of working drawings, where ideas must ultimately stack up. Just as formal presentations and informal conversations help reveal different kinds of discoveries, writing and speaking to different audiences has helped different aspects of the research.
Different Strokes

During the Ph.D., academic presentations outside the PRS system have each been under a specialised theme: ‘Mediators’ in Brussels (Kebbell, 2014a), ‘Situation’ in Melbourne (Kebbell, 2014c), and ‘Making Research | Researching Making’ in Aarhus (Veltcheva, M. et al 2015). This tended to demand a narrow view of the research, while writing and presenting for a general audience have been under more widely understood headings, like ‘Housing’ for AR Asia Pacific (Kebbell, 2014c) or ‘Art and Architecture’ for the Melbourne art Fair (Kebbell, S. & Adsett, P., 2014) and City Gallery Wellington presentations with Peter Adsett (Kebbell, S. & Adsett, P., 2015). The academic forums have tended to open up new insights into research methods and presentation techniques, while the public forums have tended to open up dialogue about architecture’s role in the city, or relationship to other disciplines, like painting. This spectrum of conversation types from informal to formal, and between public, professional, and academic audiences has been important to the way the Ph.D. developed, but also how the projects in practice and the conversations around them develop.
Conjecture

AW: What sort of public conversations are you talking about, and how do they relate to your built projects?
SK: The relationship between painting and architecture is obviously a discussion that extends beyond Humbug’s front lawn. Screeds have been written on this subject in other places, and that intellectual conversation forms part of the expanded context of that project. It is a public conversation, and Humbug is a small comment within it.

The personal conversations around the Great Barrier Island house are part of a public conversation too. Particularly with respect to the tension between camouflage and sculptural form. How we occupy our native forest and big landscapes is plainly not a marginal conversation in New Zealand; some might argue it is the one architectural conversation which holds all the others together. The Resource Management Act, the legislation that sets the main terms of engagement between architecture and the environment in New Zealand, undoubtedly privileges camouflage over formal indulgence. There is a tendency from government authorities to try and hide architecture in the landscape, and this makes a great deal of sense at one level, but there is no short supply of inspiration from here and abroad to grasp the sculptural opportunities of a site like ours on Great Barrier Island either. The tension is a real one.

AW: There is another example of a public conversation in the case study on Saatchi & Saatchi where I mentioned the public debate about the Foreshore and Seabed Act, and a city-wide interest in the Creative Class.

AW: There is an overlap here between the particular and the universal.
Yes, these are all good examples of the overlap between private and public conversations, which also point to overlaps in particular and universal contexts.

AW: And by ‘universal’ you don’t mean absolutely everywhere.
Correct. A worldwide context is possible of course. The contemporary environmental threats are global, but more often I am just referring to any relevant context within which our particular project is situated, spatially, culturally, economically, and so on. The Resource Management Act is part of a New Zealand-wide context, so is the Foreshore and Seabed Act, but the conversation about the Creative Class puts the Saatchi & Saatchi project in the context of all cities pursuing economic benefits from their creative industries. The public discussion about affordable housing applies to all home-buyers with limited funds, and those affected by that sector of the market. Some might argue, that would include all New Zealanders, others might argue it goes beyond New Zealand. By a universal context, I mean a context that applies universally to all the instances of a group, normally a big group.
Goft dividend decision policy-making on hoof!

Isaac Davison

The Government is being accused of making up policy “on the hoof” after it revealed that it would no longer be taking dividends from the state housing corporation.

Finance Minister Bill English confirmed yesterday that Housing New Zealand would not pay a dividend in the two years that went against budget forecasts in 2016/17, which said NZ$28m in 2016/17 and NZ$22m in 2017.

English said that those forecasts were based on old estimates, and NZH would have been classified on a per capita basis. However, English noted that the Government had not previously announced that it would not receive a dividend.

English said that he would be happy to see the decision reversed, but it would be up to the Government to decide.

He said that he had not been consulted on the decision and had only heard about it on the news.

The Government’s decision to scrap the dividend and reinvest the money in state houses is expected to be a key plank in its upcoming housing policy announcement.

Analysis shows just 43% of target-age Aucklanders could buy a $500,000 house under bank lending criteria

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Full text content not available.
AW: I can see how projects sit within these public conversations, and that they are part of a universal context. But do your projects really contribute to those public conversations?
SK: Yes, sort of. Or they could do.

AW: Could do? What do you mean?
SK: Well these are quite big issues, and I’m not the prime minister, I’m an architect. The public conversation helps frame and consolidate the design direction of a project. Ideas like the urban caravan park, the Quite Simple House, and the triangulated geometry at Great Barrier Island, and so on, make sense in the context of certain public conversations. But I also start to think about the potential of a project as a prototype. When the owner of the Quite Simple House commissioned us, I had reservations about building a detached house for a single retiree on a lifestyle block in an area that was drifting quickly towards suburban sprawl. At the same time, newspapers and radio stations fed the chattering classes a daily diet of data on escalating house prices, an ageing demographic, and growing environmental concerns about intensive farming, particularly in the region around this project (Figure 209). As the project developed, and as my client continued to plant at a formidable rate, I began to imagine the project as part of a solution to housing, demographic, and environmental concerns. If a single retired gardener could replant five-acres of former farmland, then a whole generation of gardening enthusiasts could quickly convert the entire region from intensive dairy farming to lush native forest. They would fulfil personal dreams in the public interest.

AW: Nice idea, but how are you going to get this to happen? Is it a little utopian?
SK: I agree, it is an exciting thought though, and slightly amusing, if not a little utopian. The value of conjectures like this does not lie in their political reality as much as the imaginary expansion of a project. The conjecture has potential to trigger more discussion amongst peers and government authorities beyond the project boundaries, but it doesn’t have to be an effort to solve problems directly and implement them immediately. Part of the beauty of these thoughts is simply to make lyrical connections that stimulate the imagination of those people around the project. Perhaps, in the end, it stimulates the public imagination too, which could lead to action. The public imagination is an increasingly important part of democratic action. Democracies can only be as good as the education system that supports them, so where public consultation and democratic systems play an increasingly big role in the design processes, a strong public imagination is a precondition for strong work.

“The value of conjectures like this does not lie in their political reality as much as the imaginary expansion of a project”
Figure 209. John Gully, New Zealand Vegetation - Open Country (1877)
AW: OK, it’s a way of prodding at a future then. Richard Blythe explains reflection on the past, present, and future practice as reflecting on, in, and for the practice (Figure 210). Do you imagine developing this speculative side of the practice?
SK: Yes, I am trying to. Case study projects and communities of practice have been particularly useful when reflecting on and in the practice, but it has been the public presentation of work that has been most useful to my reflection for the practice: to look forward. My public presentations, or public behaviours, do not in themselves describe my future practice, but reflecting on them has raised questions about how my practice might change in the future.

AW: So, where are you heading with your public behaviour?
SK: Before I describe that, I need to describe a more general public behaviour, not just my own. I can imagine living in a city that talks as much about architecture as it does about sport.

AW: Architecture and sport have almost nothing to do with each other.
SK: Obviously the activities are different but the mechanisms and place in the public imagination could be similar. Through sport, we have developed all the mechanisms of a sophisticated public discourse. In New Zealand, for example, we have some of the best rugby practitioners in the world. We have a surplus of insightful sports commentators and critics, and we have some of most highly paid theorist-educators in the world.

AW: Theorist-educators?
SK: Coaches. These are the people through which tacit knowledge of the game becomes explicit so that practitioners can improve their game, and critics can enrich the public discussion. Sport actually parallels architecture very neatly in this regard.

AW: OK, so where is your practice heading then?
SK: Just like coaches, sports academies, and athletes are closely bound in sport, I have begun to see more and more benefits of bringing the academic and professional service aspects of my practice together. In fact this Ph.D. programme, bears some real resemblance to a sports academy in the way it coaches each candidate and draws out individual strengths. I can see more opportunities to combine the academic and professional service threads of my practice and contribute to the public conversation about architecture.

“I can imagine living in a city that talks as much about architecture as it does about sport.”
Figure 210. Richard Blythe, Theatre of Projects (2013)
Chapter Two: Cons of the Practice

AW: Can you explain?
SK: I have begun to see built projects, at the scale of a house or a small office, as the basis for speculative drawings and semi-fictional narratives about the development of whole neighbourhoods, towns, cities, regions, or even economies. The story of the Quite Simple House has potential as a semi-fictional narrative of regional development. My drawing of Humbug relocated to Philip Johnson’s courtyard @MoMA in New York has potential as a semi-fictional narrative about distorted economies (Figure 211).

AW: Ah yes, you began by saying your dialogue with Peter is still going. What do you talk about now? And how does that relate to the Humbug @MoMA drawing?
SK: In that drawing, I tried to capture some of the discussions that Peter and I have had about painting and architecture since Humbug was finished. We have often reflected on the commodification of painting and the distraction an art market can be for non-financial goals of painting, like Peter’s fascination with visual perception. Obviously we are not alone with this concern, Dave Hickey said recently that, “Art editors and critics – people like me – have become a courtier class. All we do is wander around the palace and advise very rich people. It’s not worth my time.” (Helmore and Gallagher, 2012). We have also discussed the role that large cultural institutions, like MoMA, play in this commodification, especially the pressure on them to produce ‘blockbuster’ shows that attract big visitor numbers. Architecture has obviously not escaped commodification either and is often paraded as the ‘silver service’ of property development. One way to think about the drawing of Humbug @MoMA is that it exaggerates the commodification of architecture by placing it as an object in the world of commodified art. As an extension of our figure-ground conversation, it declares the house and grounds as a ‘figure’, framed by the ‘ground’ of MoMA’s courtyard.

AW: Do you imagine it as a copy or a relocation?
SK: A relocation. The hole left in Shoreham would be literally ground, but carefully lined, in the manner of Mary Miss, say. The hole would quickly become figure as part of a MoMA-fuelled cultural tourism boom: a win-win blockbuster piece of property development, and more confusion about figure and ground.

AW: Will you do more of these types of drawings?
SK: I would love to, and write the stories to go with them.

“Democracies can only be as good as the education system that support them.”
Figure 211. Humbug @ MoMA, Site plan showing Humbug installed in the MoMA courtyard (2016)
Figure 212. Humbug @ MoMA, Site plan detail (2016)
Waipuk law

A commission from an ambitious provincial legal firm prompted Kebbell Daish to engage with agriculture and go idea farming in the fertile ground of Central Hawkes Bay.

Text: Sam Kebbell  Photograph: Simon Wilson
Idea Farming

In 2006 I wrote a short article in NZ Architecture magazine accompanying photographs of a project we did for law firm in a small town in rural New Zealand. The suggestion of an “Idea Farm” serves as another example of the kind of speculative thinking that has often come out of a built project. An extract of that text follows.

“We completed this project recently for a law firm in the small town of Waipukurau, in Central Hawke's Bay. The firm has recently developed a number of clients in Auckland and Wellington, and both cities have also become important places for staff recruitment. So the project presented a dilemma of needing to remain a part of the town that is so engaged in the ground conditions of farming – fresh air, space, weather, fertility, grass, trees and sweet smell of urea – but also visibly engaged in the sophisticated understandings of law that makes human culture operable. That is, they need to be utterly rural to justify being there at all, but equally urbane to survive.

This dilemma made it possible for us to understand the law firm as something like an idea farm: cultivating and producing advice and knowledge that is then efficiently sent to bigger markets just like the protein industry that came before it. The architecture could then work with ideas quite familiar to the farming community, yet spin them towards the so-called knowledge economy. We produced an artificial landscape of sorts, organised into strips that accommodate each individual legal team and undulate above and below the spaces of production to become as much as possible a part of the working environment.

Each strip stretches from the archive space at the centre of the building, through the working spaces and out into a raised garden that shields the ubiquitous car park from view of the idea farmer. In the logic of agriculture – the furrowed field, or lines of crops – circulation is along each strip and at each end of the strip giving the privileged space adjacent to the raised garden over to public occupation.

We can think of this artificial landscape as a figure on the ground conditions of Waipukurau. Not the same ground we know from the figure-ground drawing Nolli made so famous with his map of Rome in 1748, instead we are thinking of a four-dimensional figure-ground where the historical conditions - the physical, social, political, or geographical context - form a kind of ground which is then altered by the operations of new figures - formal, spatial, programmatic or social interventions.” (Kebbell, 2006)
Interlude on Method, Part II:

Subjectivity

My curation of conversations for this Ph.D. research has been both a vulnerability and a strength. On one hand, the risk that my own subjectivity is vulnerable to delusion, denial and other distortions of reality are real. Peer review not only in the PRS programme, but also through the ADAPT-r Days, supervision, conferences, and discussions with colleagues have all been vital to moderate my own observations in light of the evidence from practice. On the other hand, the risk of ‘missing the point’ of my practice is dramatically reduced by being both subject and object in the research. If a conclusion did not ultimately ‘feel right’, then it would naturally be ignored or reconsidered. With peer review behind it then, subjectivity is not a weakness in the method, it is a strength, because my own memories, experiences, and predispositions bring enormous depth of material to the research.

My memories often enabled important connections to be made, like the discussion of battens on the south façade of Humbug, for example, which were recalled from memory and some minimal documentation, yet have been crucial to explaining that project and design processes in depth. In another coincidence of subject and object, a chance conversation with Wellington architect Bill Alington suddenly foregrounded the impact of his work on my own. Perhaps more profoundly, the process of reflection through design itself is extremely high fidelity because the action being studied is reflected on continuously as it actually happens. Ultimately my own subjectivity opened up very real considerations of what Blythe refers to as the ‘urges and fascinations’ driving my work (Blythe, Forthcoming), operating like a kind of gravity which pulled me again and again towards various formulations of collapsing hierarchies.
Figure 214. 
Self portrait, In the Manner of My Mentors (2016)
The View from Outer Space

Early in the process, I attempted to capture these urges in a crude diagram of the whole practice. It did not make any reference to the particulars of a project, it was a global view of the work, literally drawn as a globe. This is a clue to my recurring tendency to expand the context, in this case casting my view back on the practice from outer space, but it shows several other important aspects of the practice too. The longitude and latitude on this globe capture the importance of geometric frameworks in the work, and the dichotomy between ‘ground’ and ‘atmosphere’ was a valuable first attempt at describing the tension I intuitively felt. As useful as this globe was, it did not really make any of my tacit knowledge of practice explicit. It was a loose metaphorical fit.

The diagram did not explain what I meant by ‘atmosphere’, for example, which could be a metaphor for any number of things from material palettes to political climates. Rather than consolidating evidence it demanded, unsatisfactorily, the reader either take my word for it or make connections to the work themselves. Quite quickly after this diagram, I developed a different diagram that made more specific reference to the framework for the Quite Simple House which I was working on at the time.
Closer, But Still in the Clouds

A stick figure of the framework for the Quite Simple House was at the centre of the diagram and elements of the project were exploded from it to begin identifying the ‘cultural framework’ and ‘bits and pieces of ordinary stuff’ in the previous globe diagram. The specificity of the framework was an advance in the right direction, but I still relied on general annotations like ‘canon’, ‘disciplinary context’, and ‘physical context’.

A tension between the particular circumstances of a project and an expanded context is central to my approach to practice: between circumstances that make a project distinct, and the contexts that we hold in common. Throughout my Ph.D. research I have tried to diagram this pursuit of immediate concerns and surrounding context. I tried to find a framework that is clear but not reductive, and expansive without being too general. The various diagrams and their iterations are all pointing at this issue, even if they frame it slightly differently each time.

Figure 216. Revised diagram of the practice through lens of the Quite Simple House (2014)
Preparing for PRS 3, I produced a much more specific diagram (Figure 217) that evolved from the three pronged stick figure diagram of the Quite Simple House (Figure 216). The vertical axis shows the bulk of the building (top) connecting to the site (bottom), but I have come to think that this diagram is most powerful along its horizontal axis, which presents the connection between the deck chairs and the work of French painter Daniel Buren. The projection lines which connect the images of a deck chair and Buren's work fold out from the middle in the manner of a storyboard, appropriately illustrating the narrative framework behind these connections. The deck chair and Buren's work can also be substituted for other elements that have a similar relationship, like the board and batten detailing adjacent to the deck chairs which also connects vernacular architecture and the dialogue about figure and ground in painting, or the front lawn that operates as a plinth.
Figure 217. Humbug, Diagram of Humbug for PRS3 (2014)
AW: That’s all good for the public imagination, like other speculative architectural projects have been: the Fun Palace, Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture... it’s a long and valuable list. Is this what you aspire to?
SK: Of course I love and utterly respect the work you mention, but I am more interested in the propositions that merge directly with finished buildings. I like the Humbug @MoMA drawing because on one hand it is a completed building with a family living in it, but on the other hand it is a far-fetched idea to relocate it to MoMA's courtyard. It is a reality and a far-fetched thought experiment. It is both. The drawing is to scale, and it could work very well for a visitor. Obviously, it wouldn’t be the first house in the courtyard either, there have been several beginning with Marcel Breuer’s in 1949. This connection between the credible and not-so-credible is part of the poetic quality.

AW: So you’re not about to reinvent yourself as a paper architect. You’re invested in realising buildings.
SK: Very definitely.
AW: Can you talk more about how your daydreams and your day job relate to each other then?
SK: The threads of conversation and conjecture produce a narrative framework for the project, but I rely on geometric frameworks too. Each project almost develops as the instance of a system.

Humbug could have been longer, or shorter, if the site was a different size, for example. And my case study on the Great Barrier Island house shows the formal flexibility of its geometric system. The geometries are strongly connected to the materials and the construction techniques used, so while they are definitely part of a larger narrative, they are very pragmatic too.

AW: Do you always set these geometries up at the beginning?
SK: No, but they do always seem to be there at the end. The geometric frameworks were defined early on at Humbug, but they emerged much more gradually at the Quite Simple House. The first iterations of the Quite Simple House did not integrate the perimeter screen and structural columns at all. The geometry of this project became clearer as the process went on and I was able to find a framework to accommodate ongoing detailed design questions. There is a consistent 110mm step at each column along the south elevation, for example, that integrates changes in floor level with building regulations and the overall 2.7m grid. I only recognised this as I worked through the design development. It could not have been something I established at the beginning.

“This connection between the credible and not-so-credible is part of the poetic quality.”
AW: Humbug and the Quite Simple House are relatively simple geometries. This is quite consistent across your body of work. Why?
SK: Like most of our projects, those geometries are reductive, they are not avenues for mathematical and technical experimentation. The geometry at Great Barrier Island is the most complex, but it is also reductive in its own way. We used triangular facets because it was a simple way to sculpt the building into the hillside. It would have been hard for an orthogonal building to sit discretely on that site. The triangles also integrate the zigzag pathway, screens, and roof planes on a sloping site. The geometry of the Blue Basement is mostly orthogonal, but in a different way to Humbug and the Quite Simple House because this time it operates at a much smaller scale. The Blue Basement geometry begins with the tile module that was selected to correspond with the existing crib retaining wall below. The module of the wall unit at Resn is based on the minimum equal divisions of space between existing columns, without exceeding 1200mm. In each case, the geometries are reductive skeletal systems that reconcile a range of design demands. In this sense, they are an enabling device.

AW: The geometries are only part of the story though. How does the architectural language develop around a particular geometry?
SK: The architectural language fits into both the narrative framework developed through conversation and conjecture, and the geometric frameworks I have just described. Realising buildings in a material sense, and realising connections in the ‘ah ha’ sense of the word, are part of the same process for me. The architectural language is crucial to realising connections in both senses of the word.

AW: What do you mean by narrative framework?
This is the scaffold I build up from both particular and universal contexts, and the various connections between them that underpin a project.
Figure 219. Geometric set out lines, Plan (2008)
Figure 220. Geometric set out lines, Axonometric (2008)
AW: So when you talk about connections, you're talking about tectonic and cultural connections. That's right, and I try to have the architectural language make both kinds of connection.

While my approach to practice is not about any infatuation with a jewel-like object, it is about using components, materials, and construction techniques as part of the formal repertoire to elaborate on contextual connections being made in the project through conversation. The relatively long time it took to unlock an architectural language for the street elevation of Humbug was spent on looking for connections to do that. In the end, the black and white canvas balustrade-deck chairs make sense of the dialogue between Peter and me, and between painting and architecture. But they also make sense of the practical demands for the balustrade. In another example at Humbug, Peter and I realised the possibilities of the dark battens on the street façade through experimentation on site. I also began to understand more about the dialogue between painting and architecture through realising the building: the careful detailing of vernacular architectural elements invites the careful observation of a visitor, in the manner of careful observation of a painted canvas.
“Realising buildings in a material sense, and realising connections in the ‘ah ha’ sense of the word, are part of the same process for me.”
AW: Those are good examples from Humbug, but does this happen in other projects too?
SK: Sure. I realised how the Quite Simple House could take on subtle monumental qualities through detail development of the white screen, particularly the overlapping boards that step out as they rise which was a tactic in late modern monuments here and overseas (Figure 223). Craft at the Saatchi & Saatchi project, on the other hand, was relatively crude. As we went through design development of that project, we began to understand how important it was that the atmosphere was more like an artist’s studio than a globally networked corporation. This helped us understand more about the reason people went to a holiday house when they got busy. They needed to feel utterly comfortable to be productive. We rejected the early iterations of wall panels on the mobile offices because they were too precious (Figure 131 on page 133). The printed panels, in the end, were fixed with a staple gun and most of the furniture came from a local hardware store (Figure 143 on page 139). In all of these cases, the architectural language fits within the geometric framework, but also within the narrative framework.

Figure 223. Ministry of Works. National Library of New Zealand (1987)
Figure 224. Kallmann McKinnell & Knowles, Boston City Hall (1962) Photo: Peter Miller (CC)
Figure 225. Quite Simple House, South facade © Martha Stunt (2014)
AW: Would you say your design process is a search for connections? Between personal and public conversations, realities and conjecture, and building components and frameworks?
SK: Exactly, like drawing is a way of looking, design development is a way to ‘realise’ connections of all kinds. These are tectonic connections, for sure, but perhaps more importantly they connect various aspects of both particular and universal contexts for a project.

AW: Clients are a big part of the idiosyncrasy of any project aren’t they, especially private jobs? How much are they involved in the process?
SK: Often they are very involved, and usually that’s a terrific thing. Occasionally a client connects to a material or detail in a way that I don’t, and vice-versa, like I explained in the case study on the Quite Simple House.

AW: Is that a bit painful?
SK: It can be, but like I have said, I discovered something about materiality in my work from that situation. The Quite Simple House was a very productive experiment in design control, established to tackle the problem of affordability. The complexity of guiding a building into fruition demands a well established set of priorities, and there is nothing quite like a real project to pull them into focus. It is a good example of the value of building things as part of this research. It is difficult to imagine coming to the same explicit understanding through reading and writing.
Figure 226. Blue Basement, View from South East © Martha Stunt (2014)

Figure 227. Quite Simple House, Looking south along veranda © Martha Stunt (2014)
AW: Has reflecting on that situation through reading and writing added to your understanding of it?

SK: Yes, I think it has, but it is hard to capture the precise observations made ‘in the field’ (on site) with words. You can argue at an intellectual level, for example, that the plastic decking at the Quite Simple House is consistent with my frequent embrace of the vernacular, plastic decking being sold primarily into the volume housing market. And there is a fine line between recycled plastic decking and the porcelain tile on the Blue Basement: the plastic decking will not age over time, but nor will the tile; the plastic decking is a highly processed and energy intensive product, but so is the tile; the colour of the decking is entirely artificial, and so is that of the tile. Unlike the timber decking, the plastic decking is ruthlessly homogeneous without the lively variation of grain in timber or the dimensional differences that occur over time, but so is the tile. Nor can it be explained by environmental performance, the plastic decking being easily defended by ‘cradle to cradle’ logic (McDonough and Braungart, 2002). Perhaps it does have to do with association, the tile being part of a long tradition in architecture of the noblest kind, but this does not explain my affection for fibre cement sheet which belongs to much humbler traditions in holiday housing and commercial property.

AW: You can’t really just talk about materiality in isolation though, can you? It must depend on how it is used.

SK: I agree, the plastic decking might have worked if it was installed as carefully assembled parquet flooring, for example. It is one thing to invoke a commercial housing market, but another to invoke both the commercial housing market and a salubrious outdoor ballroom.

(Figure 229) In another project, the Courtyard House, materiality and architectural language was vital to ‘realising’ the connections. We made a connection to the curve in a decorative arch in the old house (Figure 228) by forming the seats in the courtyard into a similar shape. It was this connection between our work and the old house that was a real break through in the design development of the project.
The ellipses that began in the courtyard seating were also used around the soffits. They became a motif that appeared in various forms throughout the house, including more curved battens inside (Figure 234), furniture elements (Figure 232), curved ceilings (Figure 236), and the elliptical window jamb details (Figure 233).

The stair ultimately evolved from the battens, but in this case the ellipse is replaced with a simple tight radius.
Figure 235. Courtyard House Detail of the timber ceiling battens © Joseph Kelly (2010)
Figure 236. Courtyard House, Interior hall © Joseph Kelly (2009)
Figure 237. Courtyard House, Stair © Joseph Kelly (2010)
Figure 238. Courtyard House, Outside of stair © Joseph Kelly (2010)
Chapter Two: Cons of the Practice

Figure 239. Wash House Model for ADAPT-r Boxes
Making Research | Researching Making, Aarhus, Denmark (2015)

Figure 240. ADAPT-r Boxes, View of installation (2015)
I have worked on several projects during the Ph.D. This form of reflection in the practice, to use Blythe’s term, raised the stakes of reflection. Standing on site, under a certain amount of pressure to make a decision, brings priorities to the surface quickly. The actual building crystallizes these conversations by presenting the issue at full scale, in full colour. There is no substitute for standing on site, but also, many of these conversations cannot happen on site, so models and artefacts often take their place. I have presented several artefacts in exhibition-conferences and they have prompted conversations and discoveries in slightly different ways than the buildings themselves might have. I have only participated in one conference-exhibition before this Ph.D. process (Kebbell, 2005), and the mix of conversation and artefact has been a productive format. I built a full-size fragment of the Resn wall for ‘Situation 14’ in Melbourne (Kebbell, 2014c), I re-presented the Humbug project at ‘Mediators’ in Brussels (Kebbell, 2014a), and I contributed a model for a current project called the ‘Wash House’ (Figure 240) at the Making Research | Researching Making conference in Aarhus (Veltcheva, M. et al, 2015). I discovered slightly different things through each.

The model I made for Aarhus, the full-size fragment I made for Melbourne, and the abstraction I made for Brussels all stimulated conversation in slightly different ways. The Aarhus model was produced soon after I presented the concept design for the Wash House to my clients, and that model helped me demonstrate the central idea of the project to both peers and my clients. It folded them into the conversation in a way that would have been very difficult without an artefact. The relationship between the church-like stained glass and the washing line below was clear and the possibilities for colour and light were evident in a way that I struggle to capture with drawings. Because it was a fragment, and a work-in-progress, it raised questions too: the nature of surrounding walls, the interior, proportions of window mullions, and so on. The artefact both crystallized and expanded the conversation. The full-size fragment in Melbourne was a highly resolved artefact and so unlike the Aarhus model it did not invite dialogue about the tectonic, but moving the wall from office space to gallery space stimulated conversations with my peers about the role of context in my work. These are conversations that would not have happened, or would not have happened with the same accuracy, without the artefacts.
Mis-Hits and the Cutting Room Floor

Of the three conference-exhibitions I participated in during the Ph.D. research, my piece in Brussels was the weakest. It remained a simple arrangement of references and did not develop sufficiently as an artefact in its own right, and largely because of that, the observations were reductive rather than expansive. The conversations that followed were more about the nature of the exhibit than the intended contents of it.

Along with buildings and artefacts, diagramming has also been an important tool for design development. Not just as a way for me to explore an idea on my own, but as a means to open the process up to the cast of experts, collaborators, and clients. This is often how I draw connections out. I made a number of diagrams that ended up on the cutting room floor though, especially about public behaviours and communities of practice. For PRS 2, for example, I began looking at individuals who I considered important to my development as an architect (Figure 241). The data set was very small and the observations were too general to provide real insights and provoke specific conversation. I made other mis-hits too, including a series of word clouds attempting to unravel the underlying themes of my writing (Figure 242). These word clouds demanded no close observation of my own though, and like the diagram for PRS2, were shallow revelations.

As the research continued though, and data sets increased, the places, institutions, and individuals began to expose less obvious but more detailed patterns. As a technique to extract a more thorough list of the people around my practice, I mapped out the various institutions and cities I worked in since I began studying architecture (Figure 243). I set up a chart with time along the horizontal axis and the degree to which each place affected me at the time on the vertical axis, at least my current perception of it, which I referred to as the ‘head space’ axis. Above this chart I placed projects along the same horizontal axis, with the salient conditions around those projects and key disciplinary ideas we were experimenting with in each project.
Figure 241. Reductive diagram of my community of practice, PRS2 (2013)
Figure 242. Word cloud from a 2007 public lecture in Christchurch (2015)
Figure 243. Communities of practice, Groups of people, projects, and ideas over time (2014)
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**Key:**
- **GSD:** painting, art & craft, landscape architecture, typology
- **Kw:** flux, housemuseum, figure & ground
- **VUW:** money business, value based fees, transformative triggers, public behaviours
- **RMIT:** small towns, typology, flux house, museum
- **VUW:** flux, figure & ground
- **GSD:** communities of practice, transformative triggers

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- mark d.
- peter
- alex...
Stitching People Together

Presented along with case study projects in PRS 4, this demonstrated a correlation between the projects, people, conditions, and ideas over time but it did not yet reveal much about the practice as a whole. When I joined the dots between people on the chart and diagrammed the motivations behind each relationship, I saw emphases and gradual shifts in the community over the twenty years since I committed to architecture. However, these were attempts at an empirical study without exploiting the advantage of my own subjective insights.

A much more fruitful understanding of my communities of practice emerged when I considered the very un-elephant-like elephant in the room, the person I have talked to about architecture more than anybody over the past twenty years, John. By reflecting on his background, his generation, and the conversation I had been very much a part of since I entered architecture school, I was able to frame my own development as an architect, and my current concerns much more simply, and much more meaningfully. These reflections are the subject of Chapter Three.

Figure 244. Threads between people, Communities of practice (2015)
Back to the Work

The diagrams that have been most fruitful, are those of the projects themselves. Using the diagram I produced of Humbug (Figure 217) as the basis, I developed an expanded version with more detail. It was not as elegant as the first one, but it did a lot more work unpacking the references, context and range of ideas that had been a part of the design process (Figure 245). This enabled a richer view of the project, and began to put more evidence on the page about the relationship between ideas that I ultimately refer to as collapsing hierarchies. I made similar diagrams for the Saatchi & Saatchi (Figure 246) project, Great Barrier Island house (Figure 247), and the Resn project (Figure 248) and I presented all these at PRS 4.

These diagrams have been the very useful because they take me into the work itself, and the relationships within each project that are at the core of my practice. I brought these diagrams together for PRS 6, and produced a ‘wallpaper’ version for PRS 7 which is on the cover of each chapter in this document.
The house is very straightforwardly planned with open plan living spaces and only one internal door - to the bathroom.

The deck facade fits which forms the elements of the architecture.

Elements fitting into a framework.

Everyday things.

A fixing to the site.

The flat lawn sits in the centre of the site as both a plinth for the house, and the centre of its attention.

The house faces t...
A 2010 painting by Adiatt called "Taste" which makes the relationship between architecture and painting ambiguous.

Images from an installation by Daniel Bunten in New York City, 1973.

Painter Gordon Walters remains the most significant New Zealand painter in the eyes of Adiatt. Walters produced a series of 'hom' paintings that flip figure and ground.

From the beginning of the process the objective was always to attempt to collapse the logic of painting onto the logic of architecture.

The focal point of creative encounters

The upstairs veranda is where battens, chains, framework and site all encounter each other, and define the specific culture of this house.

A modest Robin-rod house in the village.

Typical local holiday house.

The upstairs veranda looking out over the landscape is a familiar trope.

chairs and timber battens along the into this series of timber frames in one edge to the square lawn in house. The framework exposes these to broader narratives about bothture and painting, and figure and
After two rejected design iterations, the idea of the mobile office pods was accepted and understood as something like an urban caravan park.

The Queen's Chain takes advantage of the two sunny sides of the floor plate, provides a code compliant fire escape, and defines the shared meeting spaces.

The collection of rare magazines and videos were housed in standard steel shelving purchased from the local hardware store.

The walls of each office pod are finished in tyvek, the material used to make disposable overalls and hats, which also happens to be both very cheap and has the capacity for high definition inkjet printing.
Saatchi & Saatchi’s stella reputation came with expectations of a swanky office but the occupants preferred something closer to an artist’s studio than an office for ‘Mad Men’.

The office pods fit and can be moved within the shaded boundary known as the ‘Queen’s Chain’ which is both an egalitarian gesture towards our coastal camping grounds and a response to the need for informal and accidental meeting space.

The focal point of creative encounters

The moving pods and the Queen’s Chain both become mechanisms to enable creative encounters between staff from various specialisations.

Florida’s book notes the value of recreation space and lifestyle to a valuable creative community.

bigger narratives

Florida’s book on the Creative Class was published as we were working on the project and there was real public discussion in Wellington about accommodating the various creative industries.

The old office was dark, inflexible, poorly organised, but also displayed evidence of its playful occupation.
The path opens the possibility for frank encounters between visitors and their hosts.

The tent walls help ‘keep it real’ and install some protection against the suburbanisation of the island.

The boardwalk through the bush is a ubiquitous feature of New Zealand parks.

The pathway used to connect the house to the hillside. The building is gatehouse.

This zig-zag pathway begins 400m away at the carpark.

The house itself follows a familiar linear plan with services and storage spaces along the back and rooms in front.

The living, dining, and kitchen spaces are enclosed by a sliding PVC door, normally used for closing the sides of medium sized delivery trucks.

The timber screens and truck sides fit into a triangular framework which is formed around the zig-zag pathway. Through that triangular framework these elements fit into broader narratives about the opposition of sculpture and camouflage in the natural landscape, and the encounters between a both bush-walker and architecture, and a visitor and their host.

Small break throughs happened in the design process when ‘garden variety’ systems could be applied.

The boardwalk through the bush is a ubiquitous feature of New Zealand parks.

Figure 247. House on Great Barrier Island, Expanded diagram (2014)
The house site itself was badly scarred from forest fires, so the triangular screens form something like a band aid for the ground.

The focal point of creative encounters

The pathway is where the tent walls, the framework and sculptural quality of the screens all come together most strongly and define the specific culture of this house.

If the triangulation works as camouflage then these dazzle boats are some of the precedents.

The triangulated screens are an attempt to reconcile the green with the orange huts - both a form of camouflage and conspicuous form making.

This beautiful landscape is so abundant the locals dump old cars on it.

The native bush is in the early stages of regenerating.

If the design process raised questions for us beyond the scope of the immediate project

bigger narratives
The John Soane museum in London emerged in our minds after the project was completed and we realised the museum like nature of the office space.

We were interested in how the office might have the informality of a house, which also developed the curiosity of a museum.

The collection of everyday bric-a-brac sits in the repeated timber wall units and lends the space both a domestic and institutional atmosphere.

Donald Judd's plywood work was a useful precedent as we explored the inherent qualities of the plywood.

The columns had a big effect on the empty space as we found it.

The old offices were clearly comfortably occupied.

The roof deck is accessible from the dog-leg in the plan.
The desks, chairs, kitchen, tables, and other office furniture are all relocated from the old office, bought from the hardware store or determined by the landlord.

The walls divide the three basic teams in the company, but as operable shutters in the wall also make it a meeting point of objects, people, and views around the office.

The timber units fit between the structural columns and use the setout to organise the office.

The many collectable but ordinary objects in the old office became central to the basic idea of the cabinet.
This was the central diagram for my presentation at PRS 6 in November 2015. It is a simple evolution of the expanded diagrams above (Figure 245-Figure 248), yet the circuitous red thread between them suggests a non-linear looping between the associations with both distinction and the common. It counters the apparent clarity of these two poles in each diagram with the wandering path that runs easily from one to the other. This is part illustration of my observations in the work, but also part illustration of my ambitions for the work: that it roll easily from rarefied: precious, esoteric, special, or specialised, and into the common: straightforward, pragmatic, pop cultural or vernacular world.
The image on the front cover of this document, and at the opening of each chapter, is the next iteration of this diagram where the four projects are organised into a repeating pattern, suitable for a wallpaper. As wallpaper, the drawing also collapses the hierarchy between the esoteric objectives of Ph.D. research, and benign ornamentation. Also, as a wallpaper, there is the opportunity to reveal many more of the connections being made in individual drawings, so there is room for this drawing to evolve again. In the next evolution, there could be a combination of elements that repeat, and elements that don’t, to allow the drawing to explain much more than can be done with a simple repeated pattern.
Donald Judd's plywood work was a useful precedent as we explored the John Soane museum in London. The museum-like nature of the project was completed when we realised the museological atmosphere. The desks, chairs, tables, and shelves were all set up as elements that help us to understand the context of the museum. The wall provide a permeable division between the three general teams in the business directors, but they also invoke the curiosity of a museum, and the display shelves also have the informality of a house. We also incorporated a fold out desk for temporary work space, and access to used plywood hoarding helped us to understand the scale of the project.
something like an urban caravan park
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tyvek, the material used to make
disposable overalls and hats, which also
happens to be both very cheap and has the
dŚĞŽĸĐĞĨƵƌŶșƚƵƌĞĂŶĚ equipment is robust,
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The 'Queen's Chain' is both an
egalitarian gesture towards our coastal
camping grounds and a response to the
need for informal and accidental
ŵĞĞƟŶŐƐƉĂĐĞ
Well's expanded things locations, the idea of the
mobile office pods was accentuated and understood as
something like an urban caravan park.

Figure 251. Detail (Saatchi) Thread through four projects diagram for PRS 6 (2015)
Chapter Two: Cons of the Practice

Conflation

AW: So, you were talking about using recycled plastic decking to invoke both the commercial housing market and a salubrious outdoor ballroom. You enjoy conflating precious and modest associations like that, don't you.
SK: I do like that kind of ambiguity. On one hand, I like to raise the value of common materials such as carefully detailed cement board, or situations, like a precious basement. On the other hand, I also like to re-frame rarefied situations in more modest terms, such as a global advertising agency and an urban caravan park. There is often a hierarchy assumed between diminutive adjectives like modest, personal, crude, or pragmatic and expansive ones like ambitious, public, sophisticated, and speculative. I am interested in architecture that can bring them together: collapse the hierarchies, or conflate them somehow.

AW: Would it be fair to say your sensibility for collapsing hierarchies also explains your interest in the overlap between personal and public concerns?
SK: Yes, at a basic level, I think it is simply my sensibility that enjoys connecting personal conversations to public ones. I like the possibility that a small practice, doing small work, can contribute to a big discourse. It is the satisfaction of watching a little guy make a big contribution. It’s similar to the pop sensibility that enjoys seeing big inventions come from the suburban garage and sports people from the boon docks beat kitted-out rich-kids from the city.

It is also the same sensibility that appreciates rarefied and common forms of expression. One on hand, something over and above ordinary building, and on the other, something utterly rooted in a shared experience of daily life, and widely understood. It is satisfying to see these polarities co-exist in a project.

AW: How do you bring the personal and public conversations together?
SK: I explore particular and universal contexts of a project by sifting through conversations, both personal and public ones, looking for ways a project can connect modesty and ambition, personal and communal, crude and sophisticated, or pragmatic and speculative. The connections are not always super direct or super clear to begin with. There is just a sense that there could be a good connection. It is important to note that these connections are not based on pure logic.

They are more poetic than that.

AW: So when you're sifting, as you call it, you're looking for opportunities to collapse these kinds of presumed hierarchies.
SK: Yes, I'm trying to make connections that will help me collapse the hierarchies between rarefied and common forms of expression.

AW: Why do you use the term ‘hierarchy’?
SK: Because architecture is so often working within socially ascribed hierarchies, and they aren't always healthy. There is no fixed hierarchy between rarefied and common forms of expression, but depending on one’s
(Figure 252) I made this diagram for a small meeting of ADAPT-r Research Fellows in September 2015, two months before PRS 6 where I presented (Figure 249). The structure of the diagram is still a useful illustration of my approach to practice, but the terminology of ‘elevating’ and ‘everyday’ were problematic. These terms set up a permanent hierarchy where everyday is always ‘lower’; they didn’t easily allow for associations to be ‘lowered’ because the emphasis was on ‘elevating’, like housing a global advertising agency in an urban caravan park; and the term ‘everyday’ comes with a long philosophical tradition that confused my intended use of the word.
position, there often is a hierarchy of some kind. Sometimes a certain social group ascribes value to industrial products, materials, even geometries, and these things then occupy different places in a hierarchy. We could say similar things about crude and sophisticated craft, vernacular and the architectural canon, and there are many other examples. I am definitely not arguing that I collapse any absolute hierarchies, I’m just observing that there are often perceived hierarchies that can provide a productive creative platform.

AW: Fair observation, but what is the point of collapsing hierarchies like this? Why do you find it so amusing?

It is amusing, but not only amusing. It is useful to challenge these socially ascribed hierarchies. It is a privilege to make architecture, but privilege shouldn’t devolve into gloating. My commitment to collapsing hierarchies is partly a self-conscious resistance to gloating. My enthusiasm for the rarefied, is an embrace of creative and intellectual privileges, and a search for sophisticated forms of expression. But my enthusiasm for the common is an antidote to the conceit that all kinds of privilege are vulnerable to.

AW: OK, how do you physically collapse them then? I mean, architecturally, what do they collapse onto?

SK: The short answer, is on the edges. I tend to focus my attention on particular edges of a project, and let other areas follow a ‘path of least resistance’. I focus on edges that form the critical interface for a project. At Humbug, it was the south façade that faces the street and includes the veranda. This is the most visible, the most obviously ‘exhibited’ wall, the one where visitors arrive, and it faces the lawn. At Great Barrier it is the outside edge that includes the screens and the zigzag pathway, opens to the spectacular views, and forms the spatial penumbra that is such a valuable part of the experience. The Queen’s Chain at Saatchi & Saatchi is an example of a purely interior project where the outside edge is the only highly ‘designed’ space. Most of the floor plate is left for mobile offices to move where they will. I have often thought of these edges as a thick wall, and sometimes it literally is a wall, as at Resn. The wall forms the interface between different departments in the company, it separates them, but by having the capacity to open up and store objects, it also brings them together. It is a kind of ‘Party Wall’.

AW: I didn’t really mean to say ‘physically collapse’ in the last question. It sounds like a catastrophe. Actually, I’m glad you raised it. It would be most accurate to talk about collapsing hierarchies. The -ing at the end is important because the collapsing never stops. As one hierarchy collapses, another emerges, and subsequent projects can then collapse those new hierarchies. As I mentioned a moment ago, there’s nothing fixed about the hierarchies. They’re quite unstable.

AW: Interesting, because your expression of geometric frameworks suggests an interest in structure?

SK: The geometric frameworks appear to be more stable than the narrative ones, but only at the edges. They are more about formal clarity, than structural efficiency. The geometric frameworks tend to dissipate as we move further from the...
edges. The 2.7m grid that defined the module around the outside edge of the Quite Simple House dissolves when it meets the house itself. The 1.2m module that is so important to the north and south façades of Humbug, is less pronounced on the inside. Most of the interior of the Great Barrier House is organised by quite ordinary geometries relative to the sculptural contortions of the outside edge where the house meets the path. Similar observations can be made about the Courtyard House, Resn, Saatchi & Saatchi, and the Blue Basement.

AW: And what about the architectural language? Is that also most important at the edge?
SK: This is another reason that the plastic decking was disappointing for me because it runs around an otherwise very satisfying edge. This is where the cement board was most carefully put together, the geometries most controlled, and the palette most intense. Like the deck chairs at Humbug, the cement board is a hero component that fits into these frameworks and pulls the architectural language together. These hero components tend to populate the edges.

AW: Remind me what you mean by a ‘hero component’.
SK: As an earthen material, the tiles on the Blue Basement are inherently weighty, they make sense of the basement in a country that mostly builds with light timber frames, but they also have a baby blue glaze and allude to swimming pools, the sky, and good weather. That is, they feel heavy and light; appropriate to both plinth and elevated object. They begin to make sense of the narrative and geometric frameworks I have talked about for the Blue Basement. In many ways they provide the key to the project. The cement board sheet at the Quite Simple House is a ubiquitous material in low-cost housing, yet by using it for the perimeter screen, wall cladding, and soffit, we could present the house as a strong singular object: a monument. The plywood sheets at Resn, triangular timber screens over Great Barrier Island, and the elliptical battens at the Courtyard House (Figure 229 on page 222) are other good examples. The hero component is a little bit like a keystone that fits into both the geometric and narrative frameworks and holds different parts of the project together.

AW: So, I know this is crude, but I’m going to try and put your practice in a nutshell: you always seem to be looking for how things come together. You use both personal and public conversations to scan particular and universal contexts for a project, you speculate on aspects of those contexts, and out of all this you build what you call a narrative framework for each project.
SK: Perhaps you are more of a journalist than a scholar, but I think that is a fair observation. It is like a puzzle that I know how to put together, but first I have to find the parts.

AW: OK, so as a project develops, you continue to build these quite rich narrative frameworks alongside quite reductive geometric frameworks that give shape to your puzzle. You look for moments, comments, and architectural elements that help you realise connections between aspects of the particular and universal contexts. You materialise these connections in the form of both rarefied and common architectural expression. And you collapse these at the edges of a project, sometimes in a single wall.
Chapter Three: Friends, Romans, & Countrymen

I started KebbellDaish with John Daish who is thirty-four years older than me, studied at Berkeley in the 1960s, and taught me as an undergraduate in the 1990s. Through John, I came to understand a number of architects from his generation who have unwittingly informed our practice, even though they had quite different points of view and none of which map entirely onto my own. Like some of them, and John, I spent several formative years overseas where I developed quite different interests. The aim of this chapter is to explain the architectural culture those architects helped produce around our practice, the interests I developed as a student and young architect overseas, and how the two spheres intersect in my approach to practice. To do this, I use my observations in the first and second chapters as a lens to look at the community around John and the communities I encountered overseas. I also reflect on the impact those communities had on our design processes, built artefacts, and publications. I argue that my approach to practice exists against a background of local practices wrestling with the tension between particular and universal contexts.
Democratic Dialogues

Elements of a New Zealand vernacular in our work, like a caravan park, deck chairs, and truck sides, have given me a certain degree of home comfort. I grew up in a suburban environment near Wellington but almost all of my cousins lived on farms, where pragmatism and good humour were both held in high regard, and intellectuals were treated with suspicion. Mine was not an unusual New Zealand childhood, and it is a shared experience that makes sense out of much New Zealand architecture. But like many New Zealanders, as I got older, I needed to escape that narrow world before I could befriend it as an adult.

Architecture and the arts have been very much a part of that escape and like generations of other New Zealanders before me, initially encouraged by my parents, I went overseas at the earliest opportunity. I took up a student exchange to the United States and then Rome as an undergraduate at Penn State University, then completed my Master’s Degree at the Graduate School of Design (GSD) at Harvard. After my graduation, I worked in Boston, New York, and Amsterdam before John and I formed KebbellDaish in Wellington, and more recently, through RMIT and the ADAPT-r program, I have taken opportunities to join conversations with peers in both Melbourne and London. The communities I bring to the practice have developed through my experiences in New Zealand and abroad, and some of the most important relationships have developed with New Zealanders who shared similar experiences overseas.

Figure 256. Locating communities. Communities of practice (2015)
While I was at the GSD I took a course with Hashim Sarkis called ‘Practices in Democracy’ in which one of the topics was the work of Christopher Alexander at Berkeley in the 1960s. In the course, we studied the buildings and texts of architects and academics who sought to produce a more inclusive architecture, one way or another. There was a broad range of case studies presented, from Louis Sullivan to Andres Duany, and we studied many aspects of design practice including populism, ornamentation, volume housing, and design review systems. Hashim introduced the course as a survey of architecture that “embraces the common man”. He presented Christopher Alexander in the context of the Civil Rights Movement and the riots at Berkeley, where Alexander taught at the time. I only vaguely knew of Christopher Alexander’s work before the course. If we discussed Alexander’s work during my undergraduate degree, it was usually as a means to criticise an over-simplified design method or make a rude remark about humourless mathematicians. I understood that the work offered a systems-based approach to design, but I did not appreciate the anti-establishment sentiment that underpinned it. I had not put Martin Luther King Jr and Christopher Alexander under the same umbrella, but Hashim had.
The anti-establishment side of Christopher Alexander appealed to my sensibility for collapsing hierarchies. This predilection also played out in my term paper for Hashim called ‘Just Graffiti’ where I used aspects of *Political Liberalism* (Rawls, 1993) to suggest a difference between graffiti as part of a democratic system, and graffiti as vandalism. John Rawls supervised Hashim’s Ph.D., *Publics and Architects: Re-Engaging Design in the Democracy* (1995) and Hashim referred to him regularly throughout the course. While Rawls is a political theorist who writes in the driest...
of abstract terms, aspects of his writing resonated with me. In his book, *A Theory of Justice* (1971), he makes the distinction between ‘social cooperation’ where citizens of a society agree on the codes that regulate it and ‘social coordination’ where a central authority incites an activity. I wrote about the function of walls as a support for graffiti that can trigger important public discussions about the codes that regulate society, and thereby provide a means for social cooperation. This paper was one of several that I directed toward the subject of walls. In each paper I took a different perspective on walls and explored an understanding of architecture as a medium for public discourse. I became slightly dogmatic about it. I will come back to my interest in walls again later.

John Daish was a student of Christopher Alexander’s at the University of California Berkeley between 1964 and 1966, at the time he published *Notes on the Synthesis of Form* (Alexander, 1964). The book emerged from Alexander’s background in mathematics. He sought to explain the complexity of design decisions in terms of rational approaches to problem-solving. It was not overtly political, but like many products of that time it was utterly committed to more transparent democratic processes and deeply opposed to the singularity of existing hegemonies. John bought into those political principles, but not as a radical. He recalls that the students most active in campus protests were from the humanities, and engineering students “barely took notice of what was happening”. John was like many architecture students at the time who were interested and involved in politics, but not enough to compromise their studies. Consistent with this measured approach to one of the most significant public debates of the twentieth century, John had a beard, a VW Combi van, and he deeply believed in empowering ‘the people’. He also believed that big institutions could be changed from within.
Modern Welly

John did not explicitly teach this systems-based approach to design when I was one of his students, nor did he bring this approach to our practice. By then he had ‘come out’ as the romantic I suspect he always was, but his time at Berkeley was important nonetheless. The value he places on conversation with a client may not have come from that time, but it is certainly consistent with the sentiment. Alexander had a big influence on John’s early career before I met him. He agreed with Alexander, that if architectural theory could define problems more clearly then stakeholders could solve them more democratically, with or without architects. In 1966, John began implementing Alexander’s ideas with colleagues at the Ministry of Works.

The Ministry of Works absorbed the former Department of Housing Construction established by New Zealand’s first (left-wing) Labour government in 1936 (Wilson, 2015). The Ministry was the branch of government responsible for most of the major government construction projects from housing and power stations to roads. It had a strong history of modern architecture, including important projects like the Berhampore State Flats in the 1930s and the Dixon Street Flats in the 1940s both under the direction of its first chief architect Gordon Wilson (Gatley, 2014). The latter was also attributed to Austrian émigré, Ernst Plischke (Tyler, 2012). The Ministry delivered ‘architecture to the people’ all right, and to this extent it empowered a great many of them, but it was a centralised unit of command and control. The International Style had come to town.
Figure 258. Centennial Flats Model, 1939
Slightly against the formalist grain then, John was one of several architects using the Ministry to open up design processes. Along with Peter Melser, John worked on a project called ‘House Parts for Designers’ (Daish and Melser, 1969) which was a tool for designing house part combinations that used information from interviews with previous State House tenants and surveys of their houses. This was a very direct engagement with housing occupants, but like Alexander, John was also fascinated by how computers might be capable of making design decisions. If computers could assist with design decisions, design knowledge could be more widely accessible. Also at the Ministry of Works, John worked with Brian Halstead on a housing project for employees of the Turangi Hydro-Electric Station (Daish and Halstead, 1969). This project explored the possibilities of a computer programme called ‘Hidecs’ developed at John’s initiative by the Ministry directly from a paper by Alexander. These projects were still strongly committed to the social potential of architecture, but they were also quite different to the Ministry’s modus operandi at the time. Under the influence of Christopher Alexander, John and his colleagues played down the formal preoccupations of the modernists around them and attempted to engage end users in detailed conversations during, and after, the design process. Conversation remained an important part of the design process for John, and he brought this approach to our practice.
Figure 259. Prototype Layout for NZED Village, Housing Division (Daish & Halstead, 1969)
A different kind of conversation was celebrated by the generation before him. One of the most famous anecdotes in New Zealand architectural history refers to an encounter between Bill Toomath and Nikolaus Pevsner in the carport of the Toomath Snr house. Toomath was one of several architects trying to develop modern architecture in New Zealand. Pevsner considered a post holding up the carport roof to be ‘crude’, where Toomath described it as ‘straightforward’ (Figure 260). The story has been re-told so many times since because it resonates with the pursuit of a New Zealand adaptation of international architectural law. It is told in a book by two more of my former teachers, Looking for the Local, by Justine Clark and Paul Walker (Clark and Walker, 2000). The book documents many of the discussions that took place around the development of a ‘New Zealand Modern’ and the dialogue between New Zealand and European architectural culture. Several of the book’s lead protagonists are local heroes in Wellington: Bill Toomath and Bill Alington particularly. Toomath and Alington were both committed to an international modernism, or brutalism, and did actually not set out to cultivate a unique New Zealand architecture. Michael Dudding’s research through oral history of Bill Alington is clear about this. He says,

“It is instructive to note that, although the Alington house ‘fits’ the arguments put forward by Mitchell, and Clark & Walker, Alington will strongly refute any suggestion that he designed his house around an attempt to create an indigenous architecture” (Dudding, 2005, p58)

He might well have been more committed to a time, than a place, but like Toomath, Alington was interested in local construction techniques too:
“He saw his solutions as appropriate to the local context; a local expression could only arise after much work had been carried out, over time, in dealing with the localised conditions of weather, building industry, regulations, available materials and technology, human need, and so on” (Ibid.)

Through their approach to construction, they were drawn into debates around regionalism in any case. According to Walker and Clark, it was hard not to be:

“For architecture, the desire for the local was intimately bound up with the commitment to being modern. New Zealand was modern and New Zealand architecture was to be modern too, but inflected by the particularities of place.”

(Clark and Walker, 2000, p7).

Pevsner and Toomath chatting in the carport turned out to be an early whiff of the hunt for contextual idiosyncrasies under a regionalist banner.
Wellington architects know Alington and Toomath well, through their significant public buildings in the city and their involvement with design education. Their commitment to public buildings and a public education system were not accidents, they were rooted in their conception of a public good and what it meant to be a modern architect. For many years they set the architectural tone of the city, and their legacy is an important part of the community in which I practice. Alington is a devoted modernist, admiring of Mies, who he met when studying for his Master’s degree in Illinois. Toomath studied at the Harvard GSD in the 1950’s, worked briefly for Gropius, and then I. M. Pei, before returning to New Zealand to establish his own practice. Toomath was Head of the School of Design at the Wellington Polytechnic for ten years until 1989, and Alington was heavily involved in the establishment of the new school of architecture at VUW in 1975. Not long before John worked there, Alington also worked at the Ministry of Works under the direction of Jim Beard, another New Zealander who studied at the GSD. Alington later joined Beard in private practice as a partner of Gabites and Beard, which in turn merged with Toomath and Wilson to become Gabites Toomath Beard Wilson and Partners. What might have been a tour de force of New Zealand modern architects quickly dissolved, but during its short life in 1971 – 1972, Alington designed the Upper Hutt City Council (UHCC) building and Toomath designed the Wellington Teachers’ College, both of which won the only two NZIA awards at national level that year. For fifteen years my mother was a librarian at the Upper Hutt Public Library which is housed in the UHCC building and as a child I spent two or three afternoons a week there until I was ten years old. I still have images of it burnt into my mind’s eye.

“Pevsner found a post holding the carport roof ‘crude’, where Toomath described it as ‘straightforward’.”
Figure 262. Bill Alington, UHCC Building (1972) Main entry on north facade © Martha Stunt (2014)

Figure 263. Bill Toomath (1972) Wellington Teachers College © Michael Dudding (2006)
Figure 264. Bill Alington, UHCC Building (1972) Bridge and main entry © Martha Stunt (2014)
Figure 265. Various views of UHCC and library interior © Martha Stunt (2014)
(Figure 265) Before this Ph.D. I had not thought about this building for a long time. I had not consciously thought about the ubiquitous vertical battens which also appear in my own work until I re-visited the building as part of the research process, but especially in light of the evidence presented by Leon van Schaik on Spatial Intelligence (van Schaik, 2008), it is hard to ignore the impact.
Figure 267. Bill Alington, UHCC Building (1972) Outside wall of library building © Martha Stunt (2014)

Figure 268. Bill Alington, UHCC Building (1972) Stacks and ceiling © Martha Stunt (2014)
Like the work of Toomath and Beard, the UHCC building is formally very strong. The interior is organised around a series of repeated, timber-lined pyramids. Outside, Alington has exaggerated the depth of the facade by bringing the building envelope inside the concrete frame, justified on the south elevation by pushing the upper level beyond the lower ones. He also mounted timber battens outside the glazing and allowed the pre-cast panels to sit proud of the frame to which they were attached.

There are qualities of this building in our own projects too. The relatively few elements repeated across a ubiquitous and geometrically reductive framework, what I called the ‘hero components’ in Chapter Two, for example (page 252). Alongside Toomath and Alington’s commitment to form, and like many of the brutalist architects in Europe and the United States at the time, including the Smithsons and other members of Team X (van den Heuvel, 2002), both declared an enthusiasm for the everyday. Their buildings were typically made with concrete block, pre-cast concrete panels, or industrial steel frames, for example. This might be partly explained by a post-war parsimony, but there was a pride in working with common materials and a common architectural language. While our work is not motivated by industrial processes, I do share Toomath and Alington’s enthusiasm for carefully assembled prosaic components. There is a degree of hope embedded in this enthusiasm: that a sophisticated architecture need not be rare, nor need its materials, or its means of fabrication.
Following my childhood encounters with Alington’s work in the UHCC’s library, I crossed paths with him and Toomath regularly as an architecture student and as an architect. As a student, I met Alington when he contributed to a first-year history course on modern architecture. I saw him regularly at the School of Architecture where I now teach, and when Koolhaas was the director of the Venice Biennale in 2014, I collaborated with Alington on a proposal for the New Zealand pavilion. I met Bill Toomath soon after we formed KebbellDaish when we were both included in a group exhibition at the Hirschfeld Gallery at City Gallery Wellington (KebbellDaish, 2002). In 2006, we bought a house very near his in Wellington, and we kept in touch. In 2010, he and the curator invited me to write the introduction to his retrospective exhibition in the same gallery, called Architect Bill Toomath: Liberating Everyday Life (Toomath, 2010). So Alington and Toomath have both been a very real part of the community around our practice. They both remained excited about the social and formal benefits that modern architecture could bring to New Zealand cities, but not all of the generation behind them were so convinced.
Chapter Three: Friends, Romans & Countrymen

The Extroverts

David Mitchell embraced the turn away from modernism with his enormously influential book, The Elegant Shed (Mitchell and Chaplin, 1984) and the TV series of the same name. The book and series has become very much part of the canon for New Zealand architects. It is an unabashedly “personal history of New Zealand architecture since 1945”. Mitchell rarely mentions Toomath and does not mention Alington at all, despite their significant impact on New Zealand architecture. In the last ten years or so there have been several books published about that group of architects to better record their impact, including Long Live the Modern (Gatley, 2008), 4 Architects (Stratford, 2010), Michael Dudding’s Master’s thesis on Alington (2005), and Dudding’s forthcoming Ph.D. thesis. Mitchell’s story of New Zealand architecture was part of the groundswell against the assumption of a universal context for modernism, and he celebrates the “home grown” over the imported. He was trying to identify a distinctly New Zealand architecture.

There is a strong sense of pride attached to our history of Do-It-Yourself building, which is often understood as the legacy of our pioneering forefathers. Mitchell began one episode, Behind the Garden (Fowler, 1984a), by arriving at a secluded beach in a row boat and describing the way locals had built their holiday houses by bringing materials over in the side-car of a Harley Davidson and lowering them down the cliff face “on a bit of string”. My classic kiwi childhood could fit neatly into a story like this. At one level, it unnecessarily perpetuates a colonial myth that we operate without a more refined cultural agenda than simply finding an “elegance” in these pragmatic shelters. At another level though, it is a very real story about the forging of local traditions. Of course, to make room for a local architecture Mitchell also took the opportunity to dismiss the European authorities.

“It is hard to claim the ‘made-in-New Zealand look’ is a genuine native.”
Talking in the TV series about Plischke, Mitchell says,

“Like most European architects of his time, his larger visions of how we might live were a bit authoritarian, puritanical, and occasionally desperately thin.” (Fowler, 1984b, mins 1-3)

He goes on to say,

“Excellent though he was, Plischke had almost no influence on architects here. Perhaps they were too self-consciously nationalistic for that. They had to work out their own way of doing things, and after all, we still applaud the made-in-New Zealand look with all the clamour of the un-confident.” (Fowler, 1984b, mins 5-6).

It is widely acknowledged now, that Plischke actually had a dramatic influence here, and his major retrospective at City Gallery Wellington (Plischke, 2004) and accompanying book (Sarnitz et al., 2004) are a testament to that. But at the time, Mitchell was looking for something different.
Mitchell applauded the idiosyncratic sensibility of two of his (and John’s) contemporaries, Roger Walker and Ian Athfield (Ath). They were separately producing their own distinct brands of vernacular architecture by re-assembling tropes of domestic buildings. The reductive geometries of Alington and Toomath were dismantled entirely, and any sense of a structural framework was literally plastered over. Mitchell titled the TV episode about Walker and Athfield “The Extroverts” and both architects were very colourful members of the architectural community, literally and figuratively.

The ‘made-in-New Zealand look’ that Mitchell talked about, is surely not only a New Zealand sensibility though. Ath’s work particularly, owes as much to the Mediterranean as it does to Wellington’s hillsides (Figure 273), and Charles Moore appears to have been in the air that Roger Walker was breathing (Figure 272). An interest in vernacular architecture, sheds, and ordinariness is a strong thread through Australian architecture too. It is not my goal to write a history of that sensibility, or re-write Mitchell’s history, but rather to point to a widespread interest in the idiosyncratic, playful, folk architecture that remains in the atmosphere around my own practice today. Ath has been the most celebrated Wellington architect in my lifetime, receiving a knighthood in 2015 just before he died. Through him, playful idiosyncrasies and the embrace of vernacular architecture have been part of the architectural establishment. Many New Zealand architects would acknowledge this. In a public lecture at VUW in 2015, Auckland based architect Nat Cheshire of Cheshire Architects declared a preference for what he calls “humble-special” (Cheshire, 2015), referring to their combinations of humble and special materials. The Labone Cabin (Figure 277) by Wellington architect Stuart Gardyne is one of many modest retreat projects that form a significant part of the New Zealand architectural canon. Through this Ph.D. I have also been introduced to the work of Melbourne architects Nigel Bertram of NMBW (Figure 274), and Graham Crist of Antarctic (Figure 275), who take ‘ordinariness’ and ‘sheds’ as a point of departure for their work. I certainly identify with the modesty of several of their projects. In New Zealand, the work of Herbst Architects (Figure 274) could at times be fitted into a similar category, and while they
Roger Walker's Britten House was published in London’s Architectural Review in 1981, but neither Walker nor Athfield enjoyed much international exposure. Regardless of their minimal impact overseas, they have both had an enormous impact on architects here, especially in Wellington, during the past forty years.

The Athfield House is one of the most conspicuous and experimental houses in Wellington, perched on the hillside above the only motorway into the city. It is home to his family, but also to his office, and it includes several apartments.
have practised here for several decades, they have strong South African roots. It is hard to claim that the ‘made-in-New Zealand look’ is a genuine native. Perhaps Mitchell was not really trying to find something distinctly New Zealand, but rather he was simply pointing to a more particular context. Something more particular in the context that would justify an exit from the universal lens of modernity, and regionalism was just the getaway vehicle.
So I certainly do not claim that my work is innately New Zealand work, only that I am not alone in the work I do here. I share something with all these architects: I enjoy the ‘extroverts’ playfulness with vernacular architecture and I also get excited by the big visions of modernist architects that came before them. But I have other interests too: my fascination with walls where spaces, people, and ideas meet is not, I think, so much a local thing.
Bright Lights and Mad Men

During my undergraduate degree in Wellington, I spent a year at Penn State University. I spent the first half of the exchange in the visual arts department in State College, Pennsylvania, taking courses in installation art, painting, art history and theory. As a result, I became increasingly interested in the images architecture produced. I spent the second half of the exchange in Rome studying architecture and the city. I lived a few minutes' walk from Venturi's well-known example of a decorated shed, Palazzo Farnese. Many of the classes were in the form of walking tours of the city's streets on which we stopped and sketched buildings and sculptures. We learned to read the papal crests and architectural gestures that gave clues to the story of a particular building or street. Among the many walks, we took routes that pilgrims had taken to the Vatican for centuries, along roads which merchants brought salt from outside the city, and to the Forum from Porta Pia, where soldiers passed through the Aurelian Wall in September 1870. Rome was a city full of both images and stories, and so many of them came together in the walls that faced the street.

At the GSD a few years later, I continued to pursue my interest in walls. In addition to essays for Hashim and others, I did an independent study with K. Michael Hays that I called Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Wall. I was interested in the role that walls played in disciplines other than architecture, particularly from a poetic and political perspective, and I referred to both in the title. A poem by Wallace Stevens called Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Bird (1917) musing on a black bird, and a book called Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man by Henry Louis Gates (1997), which is a collection of stories about successful black men in America.
My own musings were analogical fictions which addressed the wall as a support for painting, and the political implications of a wall that divides a community, to more suggestive connections like theatre’s ‘fourth wall’ and the ‘writing on the wall’. I was also reacting to the white wall, which modern architects often presented as a ‘pure’ architectural element, and black suggested the opposite. Disciplines around architecture completely contaminated the wall and it was anything but pure architecture. With this cross-disciplinary perspective, I saw the wall not just as part of the spatial world but also a vital part of the media world. Alongside television, newspapers, and magazines to fuel public discourse, I saw drawing, painting, theatre, writing and so on, but I also saw the wall in this context too. I saw the wall as more media-centric than other architectural elements, than the roof or floor for example, because it stands upright and presents us an image.
Partly, I undertook this study because I was interested in moving into the advertising industry, which I perceived as a compelling blend of images and words, with the potential to turn billboards into something much more architectural. It was also the late 1990s on the East Coast of the United States, the dot-com boom was in full swing, and advertising seemed like a good horse to back among all the gambling going on around me. The internet was also a step change in scale and speed of architectural media. Gehry had recently completed the Guggenheim in Bilbao (1997) and the star culture in architecture had made a step change too. Herzog and De Meuron were a part of that star culture, having taken Venturi’s ‘decorated shed’ (Venturi et al., 1977) down a more rarefied pathway than the pop culture of main street Las Vegas. Projects like the Dominus Winery, the Ricola Warehouse (Figure 282), and the Signal Box in Basel demonstrated what could be achieved by wrapping the simplest plan in a fine skin of carefully composed stone cages, wood, copper, or printed glass. The power of media was seductive. I bought the domain name www.walls.org and began to conceive The Walls Organisation hoping it might provide another path between architecture and advertising. I did this with the help of my alter ego, Arthur Wallace, whose first name is my middle name, and last name is composed of ‘ace’ and ‘wall’. You met Arthur in the second chapter when he interviewed me.
Collapsing Hierarchies: Party Walls, the Rarefied, and the Common

Even though Madison Avenue was a seductive idea it was a difficult reality, and for all sorts of reasons I left New York, but advertising and architecture intersected again for me in Amsterdam. I returned to New Zealand in 2000 to work with John on the design of a small house for my brother. I also helped Arthur Wallace and The Walls Organisation host the ‘Small Walls Ball’ at which I met my partner Sarah Connor, who works in marketing. In 2001 we decided to take a working holiday in Amsterdam. Sarah found work at the booming advertising agency Kessels Kramer (Figure 280), which had recently commissioned British architects, FAT, to convert an old church into their offices. Sarah also worked with BIS publishers, who had just launched the interior architecture magazine, Frame, and was building up its architectural sibling, Mark Magazine. Because I did not speak Dutch, I worked on websites and renderings for a group of young architects, Marc Prosman, Ronald Janssen (Figure 281), and Bastiaan Jongerius. Ronald Janssen was a protégé of Felix Claus, at Claus en Kaan (Figure 284), whose work also sits firmly in the tradition of rarefied decorated sheds. I learned that property developers in Amsterdam also worked within an economic and political framework for decorated sheds. At the time, local building authorities delegated a great deal of power to an individual supervisor who was responsible for a defined precinct in the city. Supervisors were most often concerned with the relationship of a new development to the street and surrounding context. As a result, developers expected to pay more for the walls that form the interface with the street. Both Janssen and Claus are very skilful at producing simple plans with seductive façades.
Figure 281. Ronald Janssen, Gear Wheel Factory in Amsterdam (2015) © Luuk Kramer
Figure 282. Herzog and De Meuron. Ricola Factory Addition, Laufen, Switzerland (1991)
Figure 283. Ronald Janssen, stellinghof vijfhuizen (2009) © Ronald Janssen
Figure 284. Felix Claus. Central Judicial Collection Agency, Leeuwarden © Christian Richters (2012)
Meanwhile, New Zealand had shifted a long way from the fragmented housing projects of Walker and Athfield. A number of the most significant young firms had emerged. Fearon Hay was founded in 1998, RTA in 1999, Herbst Architects in 2000, and Stevens Lawson in 2002. Those are just a few examples of contemporary small practices in New Zealand that began to produce architecture with the seductive power of luxurious work mentioned above. Architects like Andrew Patterson, who founded his office in 1986, were maturing. His practice later produced the Len Lye Centre in New Plymouth (2015) which is enclosed with a stunning sculpted metal façade (Figure 285) and could quite easily sit alongside some of the work by Felix Claus. There is a formal confidence in the work of this generation of New Zealand architects that no longer relies on a regional narrative, even if their websites leave more than a taste of it in the reader’s mouth. Declarations like, “...engage with culture and landscape” (Stevens Lawson, 2016) assume a regionalist perspective. There is a similar statement on Patterson’s website,

“...if a building can feel like it naturally ‘belongs’, or fits logically in a place, to an environment, a time and culture, then the people that inhabit the building will likely feel a sense of belonging there as well.” (Patterson, 2016)

And on Herbst Architects’ website,

“For most of the past 15 years, Nicola and Lance have been asking themselves this: what’s the best way to live in and feel connected to the New Zealand landscape and climate?” (Herbst and Herbst, 2016)

I am a great admirer of these architects, and have certainly made similar claims in the past, but it is hard not to see these statements as part of a marketing agenda that might creak under interrogation. As a thought experiment, would a building by Stevens Lawson be the same as a building by Pattersons on the same site, for the same client, at the same time? Or would the Stevens Lawson building be ‘illogical’ from Pattersons’ perspective? Probably neither.
We could read these declarations as statements of intent to connect buildings to a very particular context: a time, place, and group of people around a project, not just a country or a region. Many architects in New Zealand would hope that, “Each building is tailor-made as a strong representation of the client’s aspirations.” (Pattersons) It is an extension of Mitchell’s pursuit of a more particular understanding of the New Zealand context in the 1980’s. What Mitchell saw as more particular, the next generation has ruled too universal. So the national boundaries have been dropped, and the conception of context narrowed again, to the particularities of each project.

I would consider it an honour to be listed alongside their names and I am, to some degree, a product of the same ‘place, time, and culture’ as they are. I am also motivated by the specificity of a project, the bespoke, an architecture that invites reverence of some kind. And with my respect for the advertising industry, I salute their attempts to put the best foot forward into a patchy market. I also enjoy the form-making that this kind of architecture invites. But my fascination with the wall is not only about these things.
Walls are a powerful instrument of both rarefied and common forms of expression. As a vertical element, it is presented as an image, and the visual is so often a crucial part of our sense for the rarefied architectural language. Both Venturi’s ‘decorated sheds’ and their descendants by Herzog and De Meuron and others, rely on the image to present a common and rarefied architectural language respectively. But I have also explained how architects in Amsterdam work in a similar tradition of decorated sheds in the interests of a public interface. Like the public interface with streets in Amsterdam, the ‘Party Walls’ I described in Chapter Two (page 250) are a meeting place for images, ideas, and people. Saatchi & Saatchi’s Queen’s Chain is literally a space to meet and connect. The veranda at Humbug is also shared by each space that opens out to it, and it connects the upstairs studio with the downstairs living spaces acoustically. Intellectually, the Queen’s Chain and Humbug’s veranda connect those projects to ideas from national politics and blurred disciplinary boundaries respectively. The Quite Simple House’s veranda forms the interface between house and garden. Resn’s wall forms the interface between different company departments, and so on. The party walls work visually, spatially, and intellectually.
My fascination with walls is partly tied up with their potential to connect images, ideas, and people, and partly because I can conceive them as interventions on our own projects. In 2010 we held an exhibition of three projects in a local gallery (Figure 288). We produced models of the outside edge of each project without the rest of the building: just the veranda at Humbug, the pathway and adjacent screens at Great Barrier, and the courtyard and surround of the Courtyard House. It could be understood as the prologue to this Ph.D., and the beginning of my research collaboration with Prof. Richard Blythe who wrote the introduction to the exhibition. We called the exhibition Great Figure! (KebbellDaish, 2010). At the time, we did not think of them as the edges or walls. We called them ‘figures’. Our usage of the term was intended to frame the veranda, for example, as a ‘figure’ on the rest of the project which we considered the ‘ground’. The ground was straightforward, relatively conventional, and receded, but the figure stood out. We were interested in understanding each figure as an intervention on the ground, an intervention that would have repercussions for the ground. We wanted to highlight the veranda, pathway, and courtyard as catalysts for new possibilities, and evolving typologies.
I met Prof. Richard Blythe at a lecture he gave in Wellington in 2009, soon after he had completed his PhD. Blythe introduced his research through the practice of *Terrior* (Blythe, 2008), which also explores the possibilities of an expanded context with a strong narrative sensibility, suggesting a good fit for our work together on this research.
Figure 293. A Strange Dream about Egypt
Model of the Great Egyptian Museum proposal at City Gallery Wellington
© Martha Stunt (2003)
On several occasions, I have articulated those possibilities in the form of a story. After I returned from Amsterdam and formed KebbellDaish with John in 2002, we submitted an entry to the Great Egyptian Museum (GEM) competition. The brief was for a major museum to be built near the pyramids at Giza, but our proposal was for a global network of museums at the scale of a house: An Egyptian Museum that operated more like Alliance Francais or the Goethe Institute. Each ‘House of Egypt’ would accommodate artefacts from the global collection under the guardianship of Egyptian ‘Research Ambassadors’. We were not placed in the competition, but our proposal was reworked for an exhibition called ‘Dream Houses’ at City Gallery Wellington (Figure 293) where we re-deployed my enthusiasm for fictional text. We made some amendments to the small house we had designed for my brother (Figure 294) and exhibited a model and drawings of it as an example ‘branch’ of the GEM. The house had a large wall of cabinetry that included a kitchen, bed, bathroom, and storage for artefacts. In front of this wall of cabinetry was a three levelled table for use as a work desk, kitchen bench, and standing bar. The drawings we exhibited were annotated with an imaginary conversation I constructed by quoting dialogue from *Trainspotting* (Boyle, 1996) and *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald, 1925). The conversation reflected the possibilities for the House of Egypt to accommodate the informal and unguarded messiness of domestic life; but also the formal setting of the house as a site for display, diplomacy, and entertainment.
It was the combination of story and building in the Dream House exhibit that caught the eye of Saatchi & Saatchi, which ultimately led to our commission for its new offices. It was a good fit for our first client. The project we did for them also included a degree of storytelling within the design and pitching process (Figure 123 on page 126), and it continued after the project with my paper, *Interiors in the Land of the Great Outdoors* (Kebbell, 2005). In that paper, I used insights from the Saatchi & Saatchi project and theory developed by The Situationists to propose coastal holiday homes as a model for the kind of creative city being promoted by Richard Florida in his book *The Rise of the Creative Class* (Florida, 2002). As I discussed in Chapter Two, other written pieces are based on conjecture too, like the article I wrote about *Idea Farming* (Figure 213 on page 204) around our project for a law firm. In that article, I outlined the potential of small towns to reinvent themselves as creative and intellectual outposts supplying advice to the metropolitan centres. Our proposal for the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier (Figure 296 on page 296) in Wellington was not conjectural, but heavily narrative based, and the several public talks I have given with Peter Adsett about painting and architecture have been stories about the design process and the potential for our respective disciplines to learn from each other to produce a different kind of city. They are not all fictions exactly, but these stories often include a combination of playfulness and speculation that borrows more from fictional writing than the dissemination of mainstream academic research.

As I explained in Chapter Two, I build up a narrative framework for each project from particular and universal contexts around it. Narrative is a way to organise my understanding of the existing context, but it is also a way to speculate on that context: to universalise the particular.
Since our photo shoot of the Saatchi & Saatchi project, with a trailer load of sheep, I have tried to set up images of other projects that suggest a broader context. They are not the contextual images of romantic couples, communities socialising, or children playing, but they are not empty images of typical architectural photography either. Images of our projects are intended to be provocative, and the best ones undo the rarefied representations of much architectural photography. The cricket umpire at the Courtyard House (Figure 298 on page 303), the lonely lawyer at DAC (Figure 297), and the discrete little Jesus in the frame of many of the Humbug photos (Figure 3) all do this. They are not part of a highly structured narrative, but they are suggestive of ideas: the rural influence on creative offices, the shift from backyard to courtyard housing types, the pop novels of workaholic lawyers that sometimes lose their moral compass, and the institution of the church in so much of the history of painting. While they are not explicitly conjectural, they imply that something interesting could certainly happen next. They are part of the loose ensemble of connections somewhere between particular and universal contexts.

It is a long way from Trainspotting through the advertising industry, Rome, Wellington architecture, Black Walls, the Netherlands, and back to Christopher Alexander, but they all form part of the backdrop to my approach to practice. As a practitioner, and not as an historian, this pre-history is a story of the tension I have felt in the community around my practice between particular and universal ideas of context, and the rarefied and common forms of architectural expression that have emerged from them.
Figure 296. Tomb for the Unknown Soldier
Competition Text for the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier:

The New Zealand Ministry of Culture and Heritage initiated an open competition with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission for a Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Wellington, 2003. Our proposal comprised three (triumphal) artificial ‘blood baths’ as a reminder of the inevitable brutality of war.

“Killing Strangers for no personal benefit is an unnatural act, and deliberately risking your own life is more so. The purpose of wartime military systems is therefore to turn normal people into deviants. In standing armies, this can be done by building up tribe-like unit loyalties, with their own cultures, traditions and symbols such as flags, which grown men will actually die for.” (Belich, 2001)

If the symbols in wartime are tools for deviancy, the symbols outside of war should promote peace and serve to discourage the deviancy of killing. The very construction of a tomb is already a reverent act, and our approach will endorse that respect. New Zealand’s Tomb for the Unknown Soldier will remember victims of deviancy but it will not be a trophy to one of the darkest periods of New Zealand, indeed world, history.

Our approach will pursue a beautifully crafted, highly polished, materially rich and formally simple, three part, triumphal blood bath: ‘All Quiet’ deep red water relentlessly flowing from our sodden ground. A stunning reminder of hell on earth, how sick and bloody human behaviour can be, and how desperately we should avoid the irrational greed that fuels it.

(Figure 296) The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier competition invited proposals for a small memorial at the foot of the existing war memorial tower, shown here in black line. The three red pools are the limit of our own proposal.
Conclusion

Context of the Question

By reviewing the community around my practice over several generations, which I did in the third chapter, I traced the tension between particular and universal contexts. That community presented a number of perspectives on context including the international context embraced by modernists, conceptions of a particularly ‘New Zealand architecture’ embraced by regionalists, and the idiosyncrasies of a site and client embraced by many of my contemporaries. I outlined a backdrop for my fascination with ‘Party Walls’ as interventions on our own projects and seeds for future possibilities. I also traced a range of architectural languages from the common to the rarefied, including brutalism, variations on a local vernacular, and bespoke architectural artefacts of contemporary culture.

As the whole Ph.D. developed, it became clear that my work in practice has been a refusal to choose between rarefied or common forms of expression, or to privilege particular circumstances over universal conditions. Instead, this research has explained how I embrace these oppositions by collapsing them into each other and making any hierarchy between them obsolete. It has been motivated by the question,

How might a practice embrace both particular and universal contexts, and through those, both rarefied and common forms of expression?
Projects and Processes

My approach to practice has been a vehicle to explore this question. It is not the only possible answer and I have noted other contemporary practices with which my sensibility overlaps. But a close observation of our work has demonstrated how contexts and architectural expression have come together in a particular way. In Chapter One, I explained several examples through case study projects. I have summarised them progressively through that chapter and at the beginning of Chapter Two (page 183). Through a fabricated conversation with my alter-ego, I explained the design processes I rely on and I have summarised those at the end of Chapter Two (page 252). My response to the question above can be explained in large part through what I call Party Walls, described in Chapter Two (page 250) and Chapter Three (page 288).

Beyond the Wall

This research is limited to a close observation of my practice, but I would welcome dialogue with researchers in other areas. It has been undertaken at the first and second orders of design knowledge, as Blythe calls them: the level of how projects are actually developed, and how the practice works. It has not been an attempt to theorise in the third order: I have not looked across a dataset of similar contemporary practices to establish detailed patterns between those practices. There are researchers who are doing that, some of them within the ADAPT-r network. Nor is it within the scope of the research to review philosophical, political, or art, theory, for example, but aspects of my research could be explored further by researchers in those fields. Is the
idea of collapsing hierarchies relevant to some contemporary art practices? Where might it fit in a field of minor political practices? Can my sensibility for collapsing hierarchies be culturally located? I have become aware through presentations in Europe that aspects of my sensibility may be particularly ‘antipodean’. Does that sensibility resonate with post-colonial cultures more generally? I am interested in the answers to these questions, but they are outside my areas of expertise and it is beyond the scope of this research to begin answering them, or questions like them.

**Future Practice**

This Ph.D. also opens up new avenues for my own future research, particularly in approaches to conjecture and the public imagination. During this Ph.D. I have become much more conscious of my urge to speculate and the possibilities of those speculations to inform decisions in practice. I have explained how conjecture becomes part of the design process, and there is potential to explore these speculations in more public contexts. I have also noted that community groups and public stakeholders play an increasingly big role in the design process. Could the limits of public imagination be expanded through public presentations of speculative work rooted in built projects? How else might the built work and the speculative work come together in my future practice? Might this kind of public behaviour expand the scope of a small practice typically focussed on small buildings to one that contributes more systematically to a broader context without scaling up the practice? These are questions I am now interested in exploring.
Contribution

The objective of this research has been to make the tacit knowledge in my particular practice explicit and explain how that practice fits into a community of practitioners. With the knowledge made explicit, it can be knowingly developed and expanded on. This Ph.D. is the explication of my approach to the buildings and processes of KebbellDaish, and that explication responds to the question of how a practice might embrace both particular and universal contexts, and through those, both rarefied and common forms of expression. My original contribution to knowledge lies in my response to that question, and it adds to several areas of knowledge:

a) To the growing body of knowledge on creative practice in architecture: what we do, how we do it, and why. I describe what my creative processes are, how I use them to collapse socially ascribed hierarchies between rarefied and common forms of expression, and why those processes are relevant to the New Zealand architectural community.

b) To areas of knowledge within creative practice research where conversations are understood as a powerful agent of creative practice. I explain the relationship between personal and public conversations, and how the two kinds of conversation can be connected to address both particular and universal contexts.

c) To our understanding of imagination, wit, conjecture, and story telling in the process of realising architecture. I explain how these aspects of the process affect the design direction and conflate on Party Walls, but also raise possibilities beyond the scope of a single building and have the potential to fuel the public imagination.
At the beginning of this Ph.D. I was aware of my reliance on conversations, and I understood my appreciation for dialogue with other ideas and projects, but this research has revealed these aspects of my practice in much more detail. It has allowed me to dissect my practice, identify its constituent parts, lay them out, and explain them.

The research has highlighted that, like many of my peers, I am motivated by particular circumstances and rarefied architecture, but it has also revealed my fascination with universal conditions and a common architecture. It has unravelled the design processes I rely on to bring these ostensibly divergent interests together: processes that conflate the connections between private and public conversation, narrative and geometric frameworks, existing contexts, and conjecture.

My enthusiasm for both rarefied and common forms of expression is not because rarefied forms of expression can ultimately produce new common ones, although I know they can. My enthusiasm is for the dynamic between them. While it is a sensibility with very real implications, it has more to do with the poetic than the prophetic. It is the wry satisfaction in connecting things with a Party Wall.
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