Tangible Thinking: Methods in the Work of TAKA Architects

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

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Declaration

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

Methods in the work of TAKA Architects

Alice Casey
For my Father
Dr. Eoin Casey

and

For Juno
the goddess of PhD procrastination
Acknowledgements

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Thanks to my mother, Jill Casey, and mother-in-law, Marion Phillips.

And thanks to Cian.
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I have reflected on our Practice by looking closely at the things we make - be they drawings, photographs, technical details or the buildings themselves. The purpose of my research is to show that the tacit or unarticulated aspects of a creative process (in this case the creative process of TAKA architects) can be clearly demonstrated through a close examination of the artefacts it produces.

I have looked at the things we make, to try and see them as they are and, from there, to try and understand how they came to be that way.

My research is about HOW we look; and, as a result, HOW we work, research, practice and design. I have examined the relationship of the drawing to the building and the photograph, and how that inflects our design process; how we practice through ‘learning by doing’ and ‘trial and error’, with specific reference to the use of concrete in our practice; the development of research and drawing methods to illustrate our design thinking; and how we design through distillation, exaggeration and intensification.
This PhD document is the result of almost four years of focussed research in, and on, our practice, TAKA Architects.

We are a small architectural practice based in Dublin, Ireland, which was founded in 2007. We started the practice working on private houses and domestic extensions for friends and family; but in the past 5 years, have expanded our work to include small to medium scale public, educational and commercial projects. Our work has been recognised in national and international awards, with our project ‘Merrion Cricket Club’ short-listed for the 2017 Mies van der Rohe European Union Prize.

Our built work is characterised by an interest in tectonic expression and materiality. We are interested in Architecture as an expression of a culture. Travel and the experience of foreign architectural cultures influences how we operate. We are interested in materials and how things are made. We like to think of Architecture as a frame for life.

The practice currently consists of two partners, Alice Casey and Cian Deegan, and two members of staff. Cian and I both studied architecture at the Dublin School of Architecture (formerly Dublin Institute of Technology), where we currently teach part-time. We have also taught in Queen’s University Belfast and University College Dublin.

We enrolled together in the design practice research program at RMIT in 2013. This PhD process brings candidates together twice a year in a practice research symposium (PRS) to present their findings to a panel of mentors and an audience of peers. The beginning stages of our research were carried out jointly, but we have been researching separately since 2015. My research is focussed on our practice Methods, while Cian’s examines our practice Motivations.
Context

Book 1
Practice Introduction
Practice Introduction

I am starting my document with a transcript of an interview, the purpose of which is to show ‘how we were’ before this research, and to help the reader understand how our self-awareness has grown as a result of the reflective process of the PhD.

The following is a series of excerpts from an interview carried out in January 2014 (2 months after our PRS01 presentation) and close to the outset of this research. The interview was carried out by the AAI (Architectural Association of Ireland) following a lecture which we had given in November 2013, as part of a lecture series titled ‘Making Practice – How We Work’. The interviewer (Michael Hayes) is trying to explore some of the themes he saw in this lecture in more depth.

It is worth noting that the interview was carried out after we had made some presentations at the Practice Research Symposium (see pg 48 for a description of the PRS process). There are some nascent changes apparent in our mindset in the interview, which I don’t think would have been there, had the interview been carried out 12 months previously.

The lecture can be seen here:
http://architecturalassociation.ie/how-we-work-making-practice-taka-architects/

And the interview can be heard in full here:
http://architecturalassociation.ie/aai-podcast-series-taka/
On Communicative Construction

AAI
You mentioned in your lecture an interest in utilising the language of assembly. For example, in House 01 and 02 and 4house, there is clear articulation of very typical Irish construction methods, but also their re-appropriation - in certain instances, brick walls are quite literally pulled apart, you suppress window sills, and dining tables are poured in concrete. In considering this language as a whole, what do you think is being communicated as such?

Cian
There is something in the back of our minds about being able to understand a space or a piece of architecture, even subconsciously, just by being able to look at it and understand that it is put together in a certain way, or it is made out of a certain materials and how something rests on something else. We think there is a subconscious comfortableness with being able to understand a building…

Alice
It is ‘particular’; so maybe what it is communicating is the particularity of a certain space or situation. In houses, it is saying ‘this is my house and my house is put together this way and my house is in Ireland so it is made out of these methods of construction’.

Cian
I think that the communication, though, is not literal. It is just a kind of a sense of something…that the architecture is, hinting or talking to you in a certain way, allowing you to understand it.

Interview with the AAI, January 2014

Fig 1 Facade detail, House 01, 2009
### On Material

**Cian**  
We consciously tried to stay away from steel at the start.

**Alice**  
House 01 has no steel in it whatsoever. Because we thought it was cheating…

**Cian**  
We just thought that steel wasn’t part of the material language of a semidetached house - because [a semi-detached house] shouldn’t require any structural gymnastics. But I think that the way we work with steel in those two more recent projects [Clonskeagh Road and Waterloo Lane], is just a continuation of our attitude towards materiality. Materials have an intrinsic way that they want to be used. It is just an exploration of how do you fold a piece of steel or how do you assemble things made up of individual pieces? What do you weld? What do you fold? What do you use as a fin? None of this stuff is in any way revolutionary. It is just the language of materiality and we are just exploring it in our own way.

**Alice**  
It is the same principles.

**Cian**  
It is the same thing. Like with the brick, what happens if you don’t think of a brick as a monolithic wall; that you start to maybe look at the limits of where it can be a wall but also be an assembly of things - tectonic and stereotomic at the same time.
1.1

On the Typical

AAI
Many of your projects exhibit a composition of quite typical architectural elements - in the sense that one can very legibly read roofs and windows and walls. Are these motifs consciously made or, perhaps, a play on convention and memory?

Cian
We want the buildings to, in some way, participate in the wider realm of building; that they are part of the building culture of Ireland.

Alice
Or the building culture of that particular typology. They aren’t just a new thing.

Cian
But it is also about something being recognisable and people being able to engage with that rather than it being seen as something that is totally outside their normal frame of reference for a building. We like when something fizzes on the surface level rather than on the formal level. The bricks in House 01 have some kind of textural quality rather than an overtly formal thing... I think we like when something might be formally quite normal but actually, on the level of texture or detail, be something quite extraordinary.
On Ritual and Memory

Alice

The ideas of ritual and memory were much easier to tap into in our first projects [Tectonic Mnemonic, House 01 and House 02] because they were for my family. But we are also looking at things like that, at the moment, in a project for Dublin City Council; A café in St. Patrick’s Park in which we’re looking at the idea of ritual on a civic scale, in a very similar manner to what we did in House 01 and House 02.

Cian

We placed a really large, communal table outside the cafe, instead of individual tables and chairs, as a kind of a communal, civic idea. But I think on a macro scale, we would see public space as having an event nature to it, that it is not complete without something actually happening in it. There is a connection between that and the Dining Space [in House 02]. Our approach to public buildings or public space could be that there is a connection back to that dining space and that they are completed through their use and they are not a stand-alone, object architecture.
1.1

*On Context*

**AAI**
What is the influence of the existing place in the design process, does it influence things early on? Or do you come at it with a certain intention?

**Cian**
We would consider ourselves to a large extent, reactive in terms of how we design. There is constantly a sphere of reference. There is a hard-core of those things that we are consistently interested in, things that we really admire. And there is a kind of a shifting sphere of influence at the time when we come to a project. Then a project would come along initially with those things in our head but more often than not when we get to the site, we meet the client, we look at the brief, and those things tend to change fundamentally. It is the specifics of the actual place itself that take precedence. It is more to do with the pragmatics of where the light is coming from, the client might mention something that they are particularly interested in and might change our focus of the project.

**Alice**
We don’t have a whole toolbox of prototypical projects that we are just waiting for someone to come along with the right brief and right site and then we can just sort of put that prototype on the site. No definitely not. It is very reactive in that way. Even when someone says, I want you to design a Cricket Club in Anglesea Road, even then, we are not getting too many images coming to mind or thinking ‘this is what I want to do’. You usually have to sit down and really look at the site and really talk to the client and then you start thinking about what it could be. Some architects don’t work that way…

*Fig 6 Merrion Cricket Club, Ballsbridge, 2014*
On Place-Making

_Cian_
We consistently say that we are interested in place making. So, although a lot of our Architecture is to do with physicality of the thing and the detail of it, I think we are discovering more and more that, fundamentally, we are interested in making places and, for us, we understand place as being a space within which something is happening or might happen.

_Alice_
But specific. Particular.

_Cian_
A specific thing. But also that it can be appropriated…

_Alice_
It’s not mono-functional, but it is specific, it has it’s character.

_Cian_
That the actions that happen in the space are intrinsic to it’s quality.
1.1

On Figuration

Alice
I would have always said that we weren’t interested in Figuration. But we are doing a PhD by Practice, at the moment, and we are being told that Figuration is exactly what we’re doing…

Cian
That you work toward an image that you have in your mind of the thing, what it should be like. And I think if we are being very honest with ourselves, we do do that, in a way, there is a kind of a thing that we are working towards to get at.

I think the design process is really fluid up until a certain point after we know what the brief is, what the site is and the client is and what the client wants. So, it is completely fluid up until that point and then it will start to solidify a little bit and then, at that point, maybe Figuration comes into it. But then it becomes fixed and after that it is all about a process of refinement from that point in.
1.1

On Drawing and Process

_Cian_
But it [the image of the building] kind of becomes fixed and then it is all about a process of refinement from that point on. A long process of refinement of drawing, redrawing, redrawing, redrawing, modelling, redrawing, redrawing ... but there will be a moment where I suppose both myself and Alice would agree that the building wants to be this thing, it is just about clarifying what this thing is.

_Alice_
I think that’s maybe what is slightly different with the way we work - in that once that you fix something it tends to stay fixed, for better or worse. It is a case of refining from then on in, there are no redesigns, really, and I know that sounds sort of basic but there are plenty of architects for whom the planning permission is just the start of the design process, in terms of concept design.

_Cian_
I would say we are different, as well, in that before planning permission stage, we would actually have the construction of the building in our minds right from the start. Very, very early on we would draw a 1:20 section through a critical part of the building just to understand how it is built, not for technical reasons, just to know what the building is and then that might bounce back out to the overall building. We wouldn’t work in a linear way from the site plan down to the detail - the site plan and detail are there at the same point.

_Alice_
It tends to start at both ends of the spectrum and works its way in - the site plan and 1:5 detail and then you get closer, you meet in the middle between the two.
1.1

On Distillation

AAL
There was just something about it [Magennis Square, House extension]. It seemed to be both a critique and a response - which again a lot of your work is - a critique and a response to a common typology; So in many ways, it feels like it distils quite a few ideas that are prominent in different projects almost into a small scale but coherent polemic. And so I was just wondering while working on that project whether you were aware of this possibility - that you were, kind of, editing

Alice
That it is almost a distillation, that it is like a primer to the rest of the work?

Cian
We definitely weren’t conscious of it being autobiographical of the work that has gone before. It was a reaction to its place and there were lots of different versions that we had done of it and they were too complicated, too radical, too…there were huge problems with all of them.

Alice
There is a distillation that happens in every project like that. I have said previously that we get quite fixed after a certain point, but there is a huge amount of distillation that happens to get to that point, and generally it is a case of thinking: there is too much in this; this is too over worked; it needs to be clearer, clearer isn’t necessarily simpler, but it needs to be clearer (and clearer and clearer) and then when it gets clearer and clearer we know ‘what it is’. We can describe it in a couple of sentences.

Cian
It’s interesting to hear your view on that because, thinking about it, it’s as if that extension is almost a collage of different bits of other projects which have been assembled to be specific to that place, that site and the orientation. We are not conscious of that when we are designing it, but I do agree that it is happening…
On more than the Tectonic

Cian
There seems to be a will to articulate almost everything. When we are designing something, the default is to articulate it in some way - a detail or how something goes together. And then we are wondering what is the logical conclusion of that? Does this huge amount of articulation, in some way, make a place? Then it goes back to place-making again. We are coming to the conclusion that actually, fundamentally, what we are interested is maybe not directly the materiality but it is more to do with place-making, giving character to a place and having a more profound experience of that space - in the sense that it is not generic, it is a specific place.

Alice
We are at the very beginning of that. We say that we are interested in assembly and materials and construction and stuff like that. But then when we look at the way we put the joists through the rooflight in House 02. The thing from that was that we noticed how the light interplayed with those joists and that is what we were most interested in and that is what we carried forward from that project. Weirdly [for a practice interested in Tectonics] it wasn’t that the joist took precedence over the light - that the expression of structure was more important than anything else. It was actually that the interplay of light and structure, which then gives pattern, was possibly the most interesting thing about that project. A lot of the time we are actually doubling up on structure or we are putting in a lot more than is necessary for just pure expression, but perhaps we are doing it to emphasise the serial nature of something [rather than for tectonic expression]
On Thickness

AAI
I found that there is an interesting relationship between boundary and structure [in your projects] For example, in House 01 and 02, there is an alternating depth and transparency of the pulled apart Flemish bond and in, Merrion Cricket Club, there is a layered edge between inside and out.

Cian
I think the brick houses were almost a cerebral idea about pulling apart a brickwork wall and having a house in between. The Cricket Club was very definitely about making a place between the inner wall of the bar and the outer edge of the terrace - a layered space which is to be occupied by people.

Alice
A lot of it is about the expression of thickness. A good building always has those type of transition zones in them. There is definitely a thing about depth, and a thing about the expression of that depth, which will result in these transition spaces. So, rather than starting with a layered boundary, it [the threshold space] is more a result of the expression of the thickness of the building.
On Density and Intensity

AAI
You have called some of your projects inhabited structures. Is that accurate?

Cian
There’s opportunity within Structure for it to offer something…

Alice
Other than holding up the roof. It offers something else other than that.

Cian
I think that’s something we have come to understand through doing projects and see them being finished. ‘Oh, if I was to do that again – that would be a little bit like this’. We really enjoy that structure is more than structure and that things aren’t separated - so it is structure, it’s a light filter, it’s pattern, it’s a container for things of life. We really enjoy when things get rolled in and in and in on themselves and that something is very dense with meaning. It’s not one thing or the other. It’s everything.

Alice
The spaces generally are packed - literally, physically packed with stuff but also with meaning, with materiality, with all that kind of stuff, so they tend to, like in 4House, almost feel like they’re bursting at the seams.
1.1

On Contradiction (and the PhD)

Cian
However, they can be both I think, and we are becoming more and more comfortable with the fact that there can be contradictions and there are lots of contradictions in our work. I think we like when something might be formally quite normal but actually on the level of texture or detail be something quite extraordinary.

Cian
Before this PhD process, the idea of contradiction in our work would have made me quite uncomfortable, but actually now, we are seeing this as a kind of a liberating thing - not that anything goes - but that things can be more than one thing. It is not that ‘this is this’ and ‘that is that’. It’s not an academic thing, it is more to do with intuition and to be comfortable with that.

Alice
Maybe by the time we finish the PhD we won’t have any contradictions left. We are only at the very beginning of it - so we are still very confused about everything.
There are a few terms which I use in my document which I think require definition, so that they are understood in the manner in which I intend. The definitions which I provide are my own, and are directly related to our work. By creating my own definition, I offer them for comparison with similar terms in other’s work.

Where possible, I have listed a physical example (usually from Merrion Cricket Club) under each definition. The examples are probably only useful to me as a means of defining what it is I’m saying, but I have left them in the text as they may be helpful to others as they read through the document.

**Fragment & Moment**

These terms have their genesis in Cian’s research. The word ‘fragment’ originally arose for him in response to questioning about the partial and cropped photography of our buildings. He saw the photos as ‘showing discrete fragments of the work as opposed to the whole’.²

Cian has since clarified his position on the terms, Moment and Fragment: “For the first time I recognised and could point at distinct ‘moments’ in our work – places of particular focus and attention within the wider building. I would later term these moments as architectural ‘fragments’ and eventually understand them as episodic manifestations of Exotica”²

Although I use Cian’s terms in my text I think, over the course of my writing, that their meanings for me have slightly changed. Jo Van Den Berghe writes eloquently about the architectural fragment³, as does Andrew Clancy in his recent PhD document⁴. But my definition relates to how I see these terms in relation to the work of TAKA Architects and my own research.

**Fragment**

Definition: A specific physical part or detail of a building, usually (but not always) a reimagining of a physical part of a reference building

Example: The window and door detailing in Merrion Cricket Club – related to Nepali and Tibetan windows

**Moment**

Definition: A discrete spatial experience which has a particular physical manifestation within a project, sometimes a reimagining of a physical experience of a reference building

Example: View from terrace in Merrion Cricket Club – related to terrace in Siza’s Teahouse⁵

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¹ Merrion Cricket Club, Ballsbridge, Dublin TAKA Architects, 2014

² Quotes from ‘Chronology of the Research’ in Cian’s document

³ ‘The architect has to organise a mereological negotiation between the whole and the detail, and this negotiation passes through the fragment. Hence, the role of the architectural fragment is crucial, and the meaning and information that oscillates between the whole and the detail passes through the fragment.’ (Van Den Berghe, 2016)


Fragment
A specific physical part or detail of a building, usually (but not always) a reimagining of a physical part of a reference building

Moment
A discrete spatial experience which has a particular physical manifestation within a project, sometimes a reimagining of a physical experience of a reference building
Proto-Building

This is my own term and I use it in demonstrating how we view our CAD drawings as an autonomous, characterful object – the proto-building. I describe the term, and how I came to use it, in 2.1 How We Work: Drawing as a Proto-Building.

Definition: Proto-

1. indicating the first in time, order, or rank: protomartyr
2. primitive, ancestral, or original: prototype
3. indicating the reconstructed earliest stage of a language: Proto-Germanic

I use the prefix ‘proto-’ to denote that the drawings are the first (virtual) building which exists in our mental space and on our computer hard drives, which comes before the actual (real) building.

Jo Van Den Berghe proposes something similar in his ‘X-Ray Drawing’.

Although not something which occurs before the building or during its design, he proposes the ‘x-ray drawing’ as a means of satisfying Alberti’s desire ‘to encompass the whole building in a drawing’. My ‘proto-building’ is perhaps less elegant than Van Den Berghe’s ‘x-ray’, but I think I can show, in Chapter 3.1, how it is a real mechanism through which we design and see buildings as a whole.

Other Terms

The following terms are hopefully self-explanatory, but their reference and genesis in relation to our work is explained in detail in my research in 2.4 How We Design: Distilling, Exaggerating and Intensifying Character; but are used generally throughout this document.

Spatial Device

Definition: A physical arrangement with a particular spatial aim.

Example: Datum in Merrion Cricket Club

Devices can be characteristics of Fragments or Moments

Example: The device ‘Datum’ is a characteristic of the window-fragment in Merrion Cricket Club (Fig 1). The device ‘Projection’ is present in the roof overhang to the viewing terrace, characterising the ‘Moment’ of the view (Fig 2).

Spatial Intention

Definition: The purposeful production of a particular type of spatial experience.

Example: The datum in the bar in Merrion Cricket Club is a scaling device which ties together a large room. The spatial intention of the device is to provide Scale to the room.

6 The only previous reference that a quick google search of the term ‘proto-building’, in reference to design and drawing, turns up is in this article https://archies.wordpress.com/2008/05/20/proto-building-to-bim-is-to-build/.


8 Van Den Berghe, J., 2012. The X-Ray Drawing (Section 2.3-4-3-2). In: Theatre of Operations, or: Construction Site as Architectural Design. Melbourne: RMIT University, pp. 112-115.
1.2

**Spatial Devices and Intentions**
The datum (in blue) in the bar in Merrion Cricket Club is a scaling device which ties together a large room. The spatial intention of the device is to provide Scale to the room.

**Chapter References**


Practice Research Symposium

“People learn more from each other than they do from abstract structures”

The RMIT PhD by Practice model is carried out through the framework of the Practice Research Symposium (PRS). The following essay and accompanying graphic essay (3.2 Practice Research Symposium - Chronology) are intended to situate myself and my research in relation to the PRS framework. By situating myself in, and reflecting on, the process through which I have gone in order to produce the PhD, I hope to give context to the research and my practice.

I first heard of the RMIT PhD by Practice in the way that we tend to learn of most things – through a casual conversation with a friend. The architectural community in Ireland is small; much the same people teach in the different architecture courses and the practitioners among the teachers tend to band together.

That’s how we met Andrew Clancy and Colm Moore (Clancy Moore Architects), and Steve Larkin (Steve Larkin Architects). We found common ground; usually during boozy train journeys on our way back to Dublin from Belfast, after a long day’s teaching. The practices now share a small office building; forming a distinct micro-community, in conjunction with a few other like-minded practitioners.

Leon’s quote above is particularly apt when thinking about our micro-community. Although our practices are distinct and separate (we have only collaborated on one project), we communicate and exchange information on an almost daily basis. Shared information tends to be on a practical or technical level, or an exchange of architectural references and experiences. We learn a lot from each other.

However, despite (or maybe because of) the respect and admiration between the practices, we rarely critique each other’s work – only for sport and mischief when someone makes or does something particularly worthy of comment. Although we share a lot, something holds us back from forthright appraisal.

Outside of the university situation, Irish architectural criticism tends to be either supportive or neutral. In a small community, it can be difficult...
5 despite significant
evidence to the
corotary in the
political sphere

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...to express honest opinions, especially when you may be working closely
with the subject of criticism the next day. In our micro-community, we
have been known to complain about the lack of robust discourse, but
still we mainly refrain from outright honesty, with each other or with
others. There is something in the Irish cultural psyche which abhors
personal conflict; we need to all get along – or at least be seen to be
getting along.

So, when Andrew and Colm mentioned that they were thinking of
attending the Practice Research Symposium (PRS) with a view to
carrying out a PhD by Practice, we were very interested. We had been
practicing for about 5 years. As a practice, we were no longer ‘emerging’
and were concerned about stagnation; the re-hashing of old ideas.

In our minds, the PRS would be like a mega-crit. We thought it would be
an opportunity to return to the more robust criticism of our university
days; to be in the company of international critics and practitioners who
would provoke new directions for our practice. Happily, we were both
totally right and completely wrong.

Practice Research Symposium

But first it would be worthwhile to briefly explain what happens at
the PRS, and what I understand to be the motivations behind it. I will
mainly be paraphrasing van Schaik’s A History of the GRC6 and the
very useful creativepracticeresearch.info website.

The Practice Research Symposium is a long weekend of informal peer
review for creative practitioners in a variety of fields. It is a process
through which creative practitioners are invited to develop their
research capability, becoming creative practice researchers. It facilitates
the carrying out of the PhD by Practice and takes place twice yearly.
When we began attending, the European PRS7 took place in Ghent in
April and Barcelona in November.

It seems that the motivation behind the PRS is to be a ‘tangible focus of
a learning community’; a home for venturous practitioners. It gathers
together practitioners, researchers and critics to engage in collective
learning about what actually happens in creative practice. Each
practitioner’s research and work is considered to be a Case Study. The
collecting together and comparing of these case studies is the higher
agenda; explicating how, why and in what formats creative practice
happens.

For me, it wasn’t immediately obvious what we would have to offer
this forum. We were a relatively young practice at the time, with only a
limited number of built works. We had never really thought of ourselves
as ‘carrying out research’; either formally in an academic context, or
informally in our practice.

However, the PRS is particularly focussed towards early and mid-career
practitioners. It aims to help the practitioner explicate the research
embedded in their practice, to interrogate it within a group of their
peers and to then have it challenged by critics that they respect.

By enrolling in the PhD course, we were taking a leap of faith that
we could find our own embedded research; something which early
conversations with Leon van Schaik and Richard Blythe gave us the
confidence to do.

But what actually goes on at the Practice Research Symposium?

The PRS structures the work of PhD research candidates and their
supervisors. Each candidate makes 6 PRS presentations over the course
of 3 years, with a final 7th presentation being the PhD viva examination.
A PhD supervisor (but not the candidate’s supervisor) chairs a panel
of 2 or 3 critics, which includes the candidate’s supervisor(s). The
presentation is open to the public and the audience mainly consists of
practitioners, researchers, critics and other interested parties.

There is a rough outline structure to the arc of the 6 presentations. To
quote directly from van Schaik:

“Typically the initial presentation scopes the candidates proposition, the
second covers project and literature reviews, a series of intermediate reviews
cover tranches of project work devised to address research gaps identified between proposition and review, and in a review penultimate to their viva, candidates present the outlines of their catalogues, exegeses, and ‘durable visual records’ together with their design for their final presentation through exhibition, web, film or performance.

However, this is not necessarily a set format, especially in relation to the intervening presentation nos. 2-5. The subject matter of the presentations tends to shift organically in relation to the progress of the individual candidate and their research.

First Impressions of the PRS
The presentations themselves are a curious mix of formal and informal. There is a rigorous academic process to adhere to, to ensure qualitative comparisons with an academic PhD structure. But the nature of the PRS is one of forthright disclosure; admitting and examining perceived professional or creative wrong turns can make for a more fraternal atmosphere. Much of the panel and audience can empathise with the intense discomfort this can produce in the person making the disclosure.

The general atmosphere is one of support and encouragement. The presentations span across disciplines and styles; across varying levels of accomplishment and experience. On my first attendance at a PRS, I was struck by the range of work on show – in terms of ‘built work’ and creative practice research; in terms of quality and depth.

My lasting ‘first impression’ is of the insightfulness and rigour of the discourse. Work which to my uptight and conservative Irish eyes appeared fairly superficial, was considered and discussed as rigorously as what I considered to be the weightier research. Over the course of a couple of weekends, I came to realise that my perception of superficiality was itself superficial.

There was deep thought and struggle in evidence; no matter what was actually being produced in the practices’ day to day work. On the few occasions where presentations or insights were less than rigorous, an abrupt admonishment by the panel would usually ensure the candidate’s next stage would be more productive. (There’s nothing like being told off in front of an audience of your peers to focus the mind).

My Experience of the PRS
The first stages of the PRS tend to have the most dramatic effect on your thinking. We made two pre-candidature (prior to the 6/7 formal PhD PRS) presentations. We presented our work in much the same way we would have presented to a group of Irish students and peers at a lecture. These pre-candidature presentations were where we came face-to-face with the forthright rigour of the PRS.

Gentle, but insightful, questioning by the panels after the presentations made us reconsider some fundamentals of how we thought about our Practice, and what it was we were trying to do. This is what we sought when we enrolled; when we thought we were coming for a ‘mega-crit’. However, neither the seeking out of the experience, nor the gentleness of the questioning, made it any easier or less painful to have your carefully constructed misconceptions shattered.

In the Conclusion of this PhD document, I describe the misconceptions we had about our Practice and how the PRS process helped clarify them.

Refocussing
Having been through all 6 PRS presentations, I can see now that the purpose of the PRS isn’t necessarily the ‘mega-crit’ type of criticism. Its purpose is not to ‘re-make’ the Practice or to fundamentally change its intrinsic characteristics. Instead, I think its aim is to make us better able to articulate and communicate what it is we are trying to do; to others and, more importantly, to ourselves.

By clarifying our methods and motivations to ourselves, we become better practitioners. By clarifying these to others, we help the wider world to better understand creative practice.

For me, the PRS process is like an optician’s sight test; where you wear those awful frames and they insert different lenses, repeating the process on each eye, asking you to judge whether the image is fuzzier or clearer.
The more lenses are inserted, the more difficult it is to tell whether the image is better or worse. At times, you’re unsure and must backtrack to tell the difference.

Each PRS presentation is like a new lens over your work; your clarity sharpening and receding as you go through the process. I found that the first few presentations had the most immediate impact on our view of our practice; lampooning our somewhat lazy assumptions about ourselves. The intermediate and final sessions are about ‘trying to find’ the research. I came to learn that the research is actually tacit knowledge, embedded deep in your practice’s ‘mind’s eye’. The PRS process just helps you bring it into focus.

The optician has many other more scientific tests to measure the acuity of the eye. But the empirical testing of ‘better or worse’ in the mind of the myopic customer is the only true measure of accuracy. For the optician, the final mark of success is when the customer remarks about the miraculous difference between their vision before and after. For the customer, it’s when they walk into the street and marvel at the freshly-made details of the world that they can now see more sharply.

Chapter References
van Schaik, L. (n.d.). The History of the GRC.

Fig 2 Each PRS presentation is like a new lens over your work
Research Introduction
TAKA Architects is a partnership. We have worked together for roughly 10 years, and have been married for 7. Cian and I collaborate closely; often sketching and arguing over the same drawing. We both work on all projects, sitting side by side at a long desk, passing things back and forth. It is therefore difficult, and not necessarily desirable, to untangle the separate contributions we make to our Work.

However, in the service of trying to situate my research in relation to our Practice, it may be worthwhile to try and untangle the differences between us, just a little bit.

In the beginning of the PhD process, Cian and I carried out our research and presented jointly; a natural approach for us, as this is the way we work. During those initial presentations, we were criticised for speaking too much with ‘one voice’. It was assumed that, like in any good marriage, the partners bring diverse opinions and traits to the partnership. But this wasn’t communicating itself in our presentations.

Of course we have different views. However, the fact that we are married, means that we have grown adept at bending and moulding ourselves to each other. From living and working together, we have become two sides of one coin.

Cheesy clichés aside, when we were wisely advised to start making separate research and presentations, I thought it would be difficult for us to pursue our own agendas. We decided for the first time in our working relationship, to work completely separately, without looking at what each other was doing. Perhaps inevitably, this has resulted in our individual research reflecting aspects of our intrinsic characters.

In a very basic generalisation, you could say that I am the pragmatist and Cian is the dreamer. This is, of course, not true all of the time; or even most of the time. The pragmatist can dream, and vice versa. However, it does have a kernel of truth.

I tend to lean towards the practical and technical. It’s a running joke in the office, that one of the first questions I ask a client is if they know how the drainage runs on their site.
But being practical also encompasses the investigation of how a building might be used. I like to interrogate our designs to ensure ease and elegance of use; a building can’t be beautiful if it’s awkward to be in. I am interested in materials, colour and texture. I like the immediacy of construction; all your hard work starts to make sense once you see it being built. But most of all, I enjoy that my work results in something tangible in the end; that there is a physical artefact for judgement (whether good or bad).

My research is based in the tangible; in the artefacts we make. The research was started and, for the most part, carried out intuitively. I began with an aspect which I liked, and was interested in – the profile of a technical building detail. It spread to encompass an examination of the practical skills required for an architectural practice to design and make concrete. I have questioned our drawing and design methods and looked at our buildings for verification.

In all parts of the research, our buildings have been the basis. They are the subject matter, the evidence and the means through which I can communicate my findings. I have been looking at them to try and see them as they are and, from there, to try and understand how they came to be that way.

From its intuitive beginnings, this work has coalesced to become an examination of Methods. At every stage, I am asking ‘How?’; how do we work?, how do we design?, how do I research?, how do we practice?. I am looking at what we have done, to try and see how we did it and how we can apply (or identify places where we already have applied) this new consciousness to our work and practice. The final step being to look at how all of this can be communicated back to the wider architectural and research community.

Our original title for our joint research was ‘TAKA Architects – Methods and Motivations’; a bit of a throw-away heading when we were unsure of what a practice-led PhD might be. But it appears that our initial gut instinct was correct. We have intuitively, but perhaps unintentionally, split our research under these categories. I am looking at our Methods and Cian is looking at our Motivations.

If Cian is the dreamer and I am the pragmatist, it seems appropriate that I am asking ‘How’ and he is asking ‘Why’. Of course, this is only in a broad sense. Some of my research relates to ‘Why’ - “Why do we paint steel rather than plywood?” - and some of Cian’s research relates to ‘How’. It is difficult to do one without the other.

That is why I am hoping that our research, though separate and individual, will complement and enhance each other. A comprehensive view of our Practice, TAKA Architects, is not possible without reading both – they are two sides of one coin.
A Way Of Looking
A Way of Looking

“You are so determined to only look at exactly, or precisely, what’s there… and because you’re not distracted or seduced into other kinds of realities which sit entirely outside of Architecture, you are able to explain back to us their internal logics”

Richard Blythe in comments after my PRS 5 presentation in Barcelona 2016

I find working in the abstract difficult - as demonstrated (in a small way) by my inability to make diagrams. I genuinely find the making of diagrams confusing. I find myself lapsing into trying to draw what it is, rather than an abstracted idea or relationship - a trait which sometimes makes, my partner, Cian want to tear his hair out in frustration.

But the quality which sometimes frustrates Cian (and me), can be an advantage in a practice-led PhD. It means that I am obliged to focus on real, tangible things - on artefacts, buildings, space, materials. As Richard Blythe points out in the quote above, I have a sort of ‘tunnel vision’ for the tangible. It enables me to look closely, and without distraction, at the subject matter – in this case, the practice and work of TAKA Architects.

Our primary practice output is buildings. So, for me, our work is our buildings. These artefacts hold the answers to any questions posed about our practice. By looking closely at the things we have made – be they drawings, photographs, technical details or the buildings themselves – I am able to explain and demonstrate how our venturous practice works.

Rather than starting with a theory or theoretical stance and looking at our work to try and find evidence to support it, my pragmatic nature forces me to take a more empirical approach. I am trying to see things as they are and, from there, trying to understand how they came to be that way.

I am proposing that this way of looking is a contribution to knowledge.

This PhD document could have had another title: ‘How We Look’. On one level, the entire document is a description of how we look and see...
things; drawings, buildings, space, home, practice, construction. By describing our ‘way of looking’ I am offering it for comparison with other architects and practitioners. I discuss this in further detail in 2.5 Conclusion.

Over the course of the research, I developed a method which helps me to look closely. By looking at isolated, real things I can focus closely on the subject, to distil or extract their meaning. This then enables me to make observations, form an argument and extrapolate back onto the work.

The method is best represented by the layered window drawing I call ‘Small Things’, illustrated and explained in 2.2 How I Research. It was developed as a way of communicating how we (TAKA Architects) think when we design or draw. The intent is to demonstrate that, for us, a coherent, complex artefact is actually an accretion or layering of many small objects or decisions, each of which has been edited or distilled to its essence.

In analysing my research, I realised that it can be viewed in the same way. I have looked at small, real things (a series of junction details in section; moments in the construction process of concrete; how a standard roof joist is stretched and distorted from project to project), made a close examination of them to find their meaning, and recorded my findings. The observations themselves are simple and modest, but gathered and arranged together they explicate a more complex subject – how we practice, research, work and design.

The community of practice of my research method

The idea of ‘small things’ has a relationship to books such as ‘Zenithal Light’ – a doctoral thesis gathering together thousands of instances of building elements which create light from above in the interiors of buildings; the series of books ‘The Constructed Floor’, ‘The Elaborated Window’, ‘Stair Rooms’ published by Queens Architectural Press – a series of precedent studies of various building elements; or ‘Interiors. Notes and Figures’ – a catalogue of interventions and adjustments to

Key
2. ‘Zenithal Light’, Elias Torres, 2006

Fig 2 The community of practice of my research method
Belgian domestic interiors.

These books are taxonomies of building characteristics. They are looking closely at buildings. As books, they can be seen purely as catalogues and valuable references for designers. Or they can be seen to be explicating a wider architectural theme.

In the first instance, all of these books start with the development of a way of looking – the isolation of a building element or characteristic to study.

The next step is a way of looking closely, a method of focussing the study to distil a meaning and make observations. In ‘Zenithal Light’, Torres restricts himself to one or two photographs per building or artefact; in the Queens’ Students’ studies, they must make a physical model which recreates a seminal photo of the building or building element (as an aid to the model-making process, the students also make beautiful, experiential drawings of the building, which are discussed in more detail in 2.2 How I Research); and in ‘Interiors. Notes and Figures’ the inquiry is restricted to a single photograph.

The books make fairly simple observations, in a simple format. Generally, they distil those observations down to a single photograph or drawing. But it is in the gathering together and arrangement of the findings that the research gains power and complexity. Going back to my ‘Small Things’ drawing: a window is not necessarily an interesting thing; a seat is not necessarily an interesting thing. But when they are gathered together with a bench, and a bookshelf, and a bird-table, etc and arranged to compose the view and ventilation, they can form a coherent, complex and noteworthy object.

The research focusses on small, tangible things. It tries to see things as they are and how they came to be that way. The implication being, that by understanding why the small things are the way they are, we can extrapolate out to the wider subject of Architecture. We can apply our new knowledge, derived from the study of isolated physical artefacts, to our understanding of Architecture in general and to our future practice.

In my research, I used this way of looking to develop a method of looking closely. This has enabled me to make insights and describe, in the following chapters: How We Work, How I Research, How We Practice and How We Design.

Chapter References
Compound Living
“We build up a spatial history for ourselves composed of memories of room upon room, garden upon garden, street upon street…” 1

Prior to engaging in the RMIT PhD by Practice model, I wasn’t really aware of the concept of a personal ‘spatial history’ shaping our enjoyment and engagement with buildings. But it makes sense to me that the places we grew up in and were surrounded by become an unconscious yardstick against which we measure new things and experiences and that, as architects, our personal sense of spatiality is the lens through which we design and make space.

Your spatial history has an equivalence in the ‘System 1’ thinking described by Daniel Kahneman2. It is the short-hand your mind employs to make sense of the physical world; shaping your intuitive understanding of your surroundings.

Van Schaik argues that by describing our mental space, we become more conscious of our own spatial proclivities. Each description builds our understanding; each layer sharpening the description.

In my partner Cian’s research, he discusses what he calls ‘formative’ and ‘transformative’ spatial histories - see 1.0 Decorum of Cian’s document. He defines formative spatial history as the historic places of our childhood and our everyday; the places we unconsciously inhabit. Our transformative spatial history is the buildings and places we, as architects, seek out; whether for enjoyment or as research for our practice. These are experiences we consciously collect, in order to transform our understanding.

In the main, Cian and I have a shared transformative spatial history. We generally visit places together and exchange remembrances of things we have jointly experienced, as a sort of shorthand when designing; ‘Do you think it should be like X? I definitely don’t want it to be like Y’.

By its nature, the formative spatial history is personal. Of course, there are elements that we, as partners, have in common; growing up, living and working in the same city. Cian describes and analyses the shared elements of our spatial histories in his research.


So that I may add my own layer, in the interests of sharpening the description further, I have set out some significant aspects of my personal formative spatial history below.

**Home**

I live and work in Dublin. I was born and raised here; with only a few years of my life spent living elsewhere. Most of our practice’s work is in Dublin – many of our projects are within 10 mins walk of each other, and of where we live. This means that I am embedded in my city.

But if I am embedded in my city, there is one location where this is true, more than anywhere else.

My childhood home is in an affluent inner suburb of Dublin; not quite city centre, not suburbia. My parents bought the 3-storey house in 1977, living in the basement for 2 years while they saved enough to convert the upper storeys from offices to a home. (Coincidentally, they were the offices of an architectural practice; a friend of my father’s.)

The house is a large, semi-detached, late-Georgian villa. The rooms are high-ceilinged and generous, with the main living floor a half level above the front garden and a full level above the rear garden - a very typical arrangement for Dublin houses of the period. There is a mews laneway to the rear, accessed from the long back garden.

I lived there with my parents and 5 brothers and sisters. I am the 3rd youngest of the family. Although we had a vaguely privileged upbringing, having 5 siblings meant group ownership of toys, clothes, school books, etc. It was also the 1980’s. In Dublin, at that time, being 'well-off' really just meant not being in distress. I suppose we never really noticed how lucky we were to be living in such a lovely place.

Although the house was big, the generous size of the rooms meant that there weren’t a lot of bedrooms; only 3, which for a family of 8, is a challenge. My parents slept in one room facing the rear garden. There was a ‘good’, guest bedroom, which nobody slept in - guests were more important than children. My brother’s bedroom was a very awkward and tiny attic space under the roof above the entrance hall; and I shared
a bedroom at the front of the house with my 4 sisters.

The sharing of this large room was my first lesson in marking territory; in how to make space.

**Bedroom Compound**

The room was big - probably 30-35sqm. It contained 2 bunk beds for the 4 older sisters and a cot for the youngest; older sisters on the top bunks, younger on the bottom. As is the way of children’s bedrooms, it was used for both sleeping and playing. Despite its size, we always wanted more room to play. We spent a lot of time at weekends rearranging the beds and other small furniture, to suit what we were doing and whatever temporary alliances had formed and reformed between the 5 sisters.

When I was younger, my favourite arrangement was when the two bunk beds were pushed together. My little sister and I, on the bottom bunks, then had a shared ‘double bed’. We could hang sheets around the outside and make our own ‘room’ within the larger room. At this stage, sharing a small space with 1 sister was much better than sharing a big space with 4.

As we got older, and more territorial, we pulled the bunk beds apart to make individual spaces within the room. Each older sister got a dedicated area beside their bed – the 2 younger then had to fight it out over the leftover, shared parts of the room. My mother allowed us to furnish our areas with whatever things we could find around the house that would fit into the small spaces. I think she even bought us a book on interior design for children’s bedrooms. We were very pleased with ourselves for a short while.

Finally, the teenage years hit. My eldest sister moved to my brother’s room (who moved into a room in the basement, as he was the eldest and needed the independence being 2 floors below my parents could provide) and the large front room was split with stud walls into 2 smaller rooms.

We broke down the bunk beds into individual beds. I shared one room with my older sister and the 2 youngest sisters shared the other.

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Key
1. Lizzie
2. Isobel
3. Alice
4. Mary-Ann
5. Edwina
the rooms were small and had built-in wardrobes which restricted the layout, the days of making space by agreement were over for now.

The simple freedom to change the layout of our bedroom instilled in me a pleasure in having an effect on my physical surroundings; a satisfaction in making my own space, to my own requirements. Having to negotiate and agree the physical boundaries with my sisters taught me to (literally) hold my ground; but also to be comfortable with flexibility - things change, what was true yesterday isn’t necessarily true today.

**Family Compound**

The sharing of our bedroom was precursor to a more dispersed family living arrangement. Although my whole childhood was spent living in the house in Burlington Road, in later years, there were other houses in which we lived as a family.

Including Burlington Road, there are 4 houses in close proximity, which we occupied as an older family - a sort of dispersed family compound.

The first is a mews house in Waterloo Lane, built by my parents in the 1990’s, adjacent to the rear garden of Burlington Road. The older siblings lived in this house, at different stages, while in university. You could look from the kitchen window in Burlington Road into the rear bedroom window of the house in Waterloo Lane - a contingent type of independence for a 19 year old. There was a back door to the rear garden of Burlington Road beside the mews, so movement between the two houses was daily.

My father based his doctor’s practice in a terraced Victorian house (House 02) on Morehampton Road, a few minutes’ walk away. On the way home from school, when we were young, we would call in to say hello and to play with the photocopier. In later years, my parents moved into this house, after TAKA had carried out a refurbishment of it. At the same time my sister also built a mews house (House 01) in the rear garden, which TAKA designed. These were TAKA’s first two projects.

For a period, members of our family lived in all 4 houses at the same time - usually coming together on a Sunday in the new dining room we

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**Key**

1. Burlington Road
2. Morehampton Road (House 02), before refurbishment by TAKA
3. Waterloo Lane, before refurbishment by TAKA
4. Morehampton Road (House 01), designed by TAKA

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*Fig 4 Four Houses*
had designed in Morehampton Road. But as I learnt while sharing a
bedroom - things change; what was true yesterday isn’t necessarily true
today.

Burlington Road was sold, my sister and her family who were living
in House 01, had to move to London, my brother and another sister
also moved away (the economic crash was hitting hard), and my father
became ill. The house in Morehampton Rd (House 02) was too much
to manage. So TAKA designed a refurbishment of the mews house in
Waterloo Lane, for my parents, tailoring it once again to suit the change
in the family configuration.

Unfortunately, my father only spent one night in the house. He died
about a month after my parents moved in. The house in Morehampton
Road was sold and my mother moved to the country.

Myself and Cian have been living in this house in Waterloo Lane - the
last fragment of the family compound - with our new daughter, since the
summer of 2016.

The description, above, of my family’s movements between the four
houses is abridged. There were many different iterations, as people
grew and needs changed. I have lived in Burlington Road for two
separate periods and in Waterloo Lane for three – sometimes with my
family, sometimes with Cian. My sisters are the same - but at different
times and in different houses.

In my case, Van Schaik’s description of spatial history (quoted above)
is particularly appropriate. We lived and re-lived in the houses, which
TAKA then re-imagined in refurbishments, extensions and new houses.
Because of this, my spatial history folds in and over itself. Each new layer
is an accretion; informed by our previous inhabitation and affecting the
next.

Fig 5 Family Compound - how we lived and relived

Key
1. 1978 - 2001
   I lived here for all of my childhood, with my parents and 5 brothers and sisters.
2. 2002 - 2003
   When I returned from travelling, I lived here with my sister and a friend for my final year
   in university.
3. 2007
   Myself and Cian lived here on our return from London. We designed the refurbishment
   of this house (House 02), while living in it.
4. 2008
   We moved back in with my parents while House 01 & 02 were being built, in order to
   save money to buy our own house. (Magennis Sq – not on map)
5. 2008
   My parents moved to their new home, where we would all visit for Sunday lunch.
6. 2008 - 2013
   My sister and her husband live here with their young family.
7. 2014
   House 01 is too large for my parents, due to my father’s ill health. They decide to move
   to Waterloo Lane, after TAKA designs a refurbishment.
8. 2016 - present
   My mother moved to the country, after my father died. Myself and Cian are currently
   living here with our new daughter Juno
Compound Living

Cian and I have lived, or spent a lot of time, in all four houses, both before and after TAKA carried out work to them. We have refurbished two of them (Waterloo Lane and House 02, Morehampton Rd) and designed the third (House 01, Morehampton Rd).

The only building we had no input on was Burlington Rd. But it is still significant, as it became an important reference in our first two projects and produced a way of working which has become fundamental to our Practice.

In designing the two new family homes, we used fragments of the house in Burlington Road and re-made them in the new houses (see ‘compound fragment’ images at end of chapter). We wanted my family to feel a familiarity with the new spaces; as they were worried about leaving their home. The easy connection between the mews in Waterloo Lane and the house in Burlington Road manifested itself as a shared (but divided) garden between House 01 and House 02. We took remembered physical moments of the old house – the dining table, the stair hall, the living room - and reimagined them to suit the new family homes.

We were distilling physical essences and creating new intensified versions, in the service of connecting people to the architecture. In later chapters, I discuss how this way of working has come to permeate our entire Practice. We used the Practice’s interest in tectonic expression to communicate; as a means of embedding the intensified fragments of the old home in the new houses.

It created a sort of unconscious familiarity; an ease. When remembering the house in Burlington Road, I think that’s what I value the most - the comfort and ease. And perhaps that’s what I am unconsciously trying to re-create in other projects.

When I think about the interior of Merrion Cricket Club, I see that we made rooms that would be familiar to the club members. We used elements of a traditional clubhouse – timber panelling, a trophy cabinet, a fireplace – to create a sense of ease and comfort; to embed the potentially unfamiliar, new clubhouse within the culture of the

Fig 6 How the physical qualities of each house informed the occupation of the next

Key
1. Burlington Road
2. Waterloo Lane, after refurbishment by TAKA
3. Morehampton Road (House 02), after refurbishment by TAKA
4. Morehampton Road (House 01), designed by TAKA

7 It’s worth noting that these features were not present in the original 1970’s clubhouse. The familiarity relates to a typological sense of what a cricket club should be; to a collective cultural memory, rather than a personal one.
people who used it. We learned the value of creating a poetic connection between a building and its users, from the re-occupying of houses by my family.

My pragmatic nature is intrinsic. But it has been reinforced by being so connected to and familiar with our projects. I am in a slightly unusual situation (for an architect), in having lived in, and with, the things that we have designed. When I was young, I remember my mother repeatedly complaining about ‘bloody architects’, when having to deal with some awkward feature of a building. This didn’t change when the ‘bloody architect’ was her daughter or son-in-law.

Family and friends can be startlingly honest at times. Designing houses for my family has meant that any awkwardness or poor functionality is discussed at length and in great detail – usually while I’m trying to eat my Sunday lunch. Visiting Cian’s home, where TAKA built a new house⁸ for a friend, has resulted in some frank, and not always positive, reviews by family and neighbours.

We have been unable to walk away from our architectural problems. But the benefit of being trapped in your own mistakes, is that we learn what is good and what is not.

I describe, in chapter 2.3 How We Practice, a sort of trial and error method which underpins our Practice. I think this has its roots in the fact that our 1st projects were for friends and family. We were freer to experiment than we would have been for a non-related client. Family have faith that you know what you’re doing. But we were also more tied to the projects - so we have had to face the consequences when experiments were less than successful.

As a result, I think we (TAKA) aren’t intimidated by the uncertainty of building - something which can restrict the progress of an architectural practice. Success isn’t necessarily tied to how perfect the final building is or how perfect the process was.

Poetic ambitions underpin all our buildings. We want to connect the architecture to the client, to the context, to the culture of building. These aims are tempered and grounded by embracing pragmatic restraints. We like things to be poetically pragmatic or pragmatically poetic.

Through the process of the PhD⁹, we have realised that we are happy when a design for something satisfies both the poetic and the pragmatic. I have realised that the compound nature of my family spatial history is, at least partly, responsible for this sensibility.

Poetic ambitions derive from a desire to feel connected to the new spaces we created. Pragmatic restraints are the stuff of everyday occupation and should be embraced and celebrated.

Making space and marking territory from a young age, by arranging and rearranging my personal space, embedded in me a deep satisfaction at having an impact on my living environment. In later years, the slightly nomadic nature of our occupation of the four houses, meant that I was living in layers of inhabitation. We each made our mark on the houses, rearranging them to suit personal remembrances of how we live; the new occupation a distillation of the last and an intensification of the inhabitation in general.

The informal or ad-hoc processes of our first projects, making new homes for my family, have crystallised into fundamental working methods for our practice.

Recreating physical essences of past homes has lead us to an urge to create intensified architectural situations. The distilling, enhancing and intensifying of physical qualities is a working method which we apply to architectural forms, typologies, details, materials and characteristics.

Our close connection to the projects gave us licence to experiment and take risks. Trial and error is only possible if given the freedom to fail and make mistakes.

The layering of domestic occupation has equivalences in the layering of the ‘small things’ of my research. Each inhabitation was an overlay on the last; none particularly remarkable or out of the ordinary in itself. Power and meaning is in the accretion, rather than the singular.
I am hoping that my account of my personal formative spatial history expands and complements Cian’s research, giving a broader view of the roots of our practice’s spatiality. At the very least, it contextualises the beginnings of our practice, making new homes for family and friends.

The articulation of the layering of my spatial history in and over itself, gives insight into how our working methods developed. It also expresses another ‘how’; how I am the way that I am.

The following pages graphically illustrate the ‘compound’ lessons we learned from the interweaving of my spatial history and our first projects. These became the basis of our future practice methods.
Compound Living

1.6

Compound Fragments

Key
1. Dining Room, Original Family House, Burlington Road, Dublin
2. Dining Room, House 02, TAKA Architects, 2009

The Dining Room in House 02 was designed to be the fulcrum of the house, much like it was in Burlington Road.

The new concrete table is metaphorically anchoring the family to the new home. The solid short sides reflect the more democratic, older family, with parents sitting amongst the children rather than at either end.

Key
1. Stairs as Room, Original Family House, Burlington Road, Dublin
2. Stairs as Room, House 01, TAKA Architects, 2009

The hallway and staircase in our original family home was remembered as a place to play and take phone calls.

We re-made it in House 01 into a stepped landscape; a stairs on steroids.

The width of the stairs also allowed for a large disabled access WC (a requirement for new houses) to be contained under the staircase.

Fig 8 Dining Room

Fig 9 Stairs as Room
Compound Fragments

Key
1. Living Room Hearth, Original Family House, Burlington Road, Dublin
2. Living and Kitchen Hearths, House 01, TAKA Architects, 2009

The easy gathering around the fireplace in the Living Room in Burlington Road was reimagined as two eccentrically placed hearths (cooking island and fireplace) in House 01.

‘Special’ places are marked with blue and white patterns; custom glazed tiles in House 01 and glazed bricks in House 02.

Fig 10 the Hearth

 Compound Fragments

Key
1. Garden Sheds, House 01 + House 02, TAKA Architects, 2009
2. Garden Shed, Waterloo Lane, TAKA Architects, 2015

The easy connection between the mews at Waterloo Lane and the garden of the house in Burlington Road was echoed in the design of the garden between House 01 and House 02 in Morehampton Road.

The garden is shared but divided. Garden sheds are placed between the two houses, from which screens slide out to separate the garden. Sheds that divide in half in Morehampton Road become a shed that doubles in Waterloo Lane. The mirrored wall to the utility room shed doubles the size of the small courtyard garden.

Fig 11 Garden Sheds
1.6

Compound Fragments

Key
1. Over-lapping Glazed Screen, House 01 + House 02, TAKA Architects, 2009
2. Infill Glazed Screen, Waterloo Lane, TAKA Architects, 2015

We made an over-lapping glazed screen between the garden wall and the rear return of the existing house, to form the dining room extension in House 02.

In Waterloo Lane, a screen with many of the same elements is inserted to fill an existing opening.

Compounding Mistakes

In our 1st projects we were interested in using standard construction methods, as far as possible. We wanted to make poetic spaces out of everyday stuff.

We designed this door to be the largest size it could be, using standard butt hinges. The weight was just within the limits of the hinge manufacturer’s recommended maximum but it was too heavy and kept dropping, leaving a gap at the top and making it difficult to open.

It leaked and let the wind through during family dinners. It was re-hung 3 times. We only noticed that it had originally been installed upside down on the 3rd re-hanging.
We had a poetic idea about ventilating bedrooms through open weave brickwork; that you would be aware of the brick even when lying in bed.

In London I had been designing refurbishments. I had never designed and built a new house before and wasn’t aware of the regulation requiring fire escape windows in all bedrooms. Our poetic lattice brickwork had blocked the only fire escape from my nephews’ bedroom.

My sister refused to remove the brickwork, as she liked it. I lay awake at nights worrying about fires.

When the house was sold, we forced my sister and her husband to remove the brickwork. We refused to give them the appropriate compliance certificates, until they did. The brickwork is now removed.

Fig 14 Problematic Window, House 01, TAKA Architects, 2009

The columns here are board-marked concrete and the beams fair-faced. We liked the poetic notion that the horizontal marking would make the columns appear to be in compression; being squeezed by the load of the beams and walls above, like strata in bedrock.

The board-marking is an apparently rough finish. However it takes considerable skill and knowledge to achieve. Some of the columns had to be poured 3 times. It’s not something we have ever tried to do again. It takes too much effort to achieve.

Fig 15 Problematic Structure, House 02, TAKA Architects, 2009
1.6

**Distillation and Intensification**

Key
1. A tall window with a view to neighbouring trees
2. Angled window surround to reflect light
3. Display of ornaments
4. A drinks cabinet
5. Books and magazines
6. A seat
7. Opening ventilation panels

![The Original Window in Burlington Road](image1)

**Fig 16 Living Room Window, Burlington Road**

**A Distillation of the Original Window**

Forms are reduced and simplified

![A Distillation of the Original Window](image2)

**Fig 17 Living Room Window, Morehampton Road, House 02**
An Intensification of the Distillation of the Original Window

Previously distilled forms are overlaid with more layers of distilled elements of the original window.

1. A tall window with a view to neighbouring trees
2. Display of ornaments
3. A drinks cabinet
4. Books and magazines
5. A seat
6. Opening ventilation panels

Distillation and Intensification

Chapter References


