HOW TO USE THIS DOCUMENT

This document is arranged into a series of booklets and folios. Each is intended to be able to be read independently, and to stand on its own either as the description of a single work, or as a summation of thoughts on a certain topic as developed and demonstrated over a series of works. Taken as a whole, the collection of booklets adds up to a cumulative argument. As a group they describe a reflective practice through documenting what has been done in a systematic and structured way.

The booklets and folios as individual entities should be able to be read in any order, but for the purposes of structuring this presentation they have been given numbers and placed in sequence. The matrix, however, is multi-directional. Each discussion is not intended in any way to be comprehensive on the topic, but to demonstrate through comparative examples how a specific addressing of each topic has arisen through a series of completed, concrete works. The topics are intentionally broad. Each could be the beginning of another investigation, the start for a new project, a future design studio brief or just a reflection on a fragment of architecture.

Given this structure and the need for each booklet to be able to stand independently, some repetition of material is inevitable. This serves to reinforce certain points, and to show how a particular approach or solution can be understood both in relation to other decisions made within the same work, or by comparison to similar investigations and decisions made across a series of different works over time.

How to structure the material is really the subject of this PhD (how to find order in a field of inter-related and complex things). The structure of what is presented defines what is important at this point, and like the work itself, aims to clarify a found and evident condition through revealing the forces which produced it and the way it appears in the world.

The text in the project folios is taken from presentation of the works at the time of their completion, and is a direct explanation of the components of each project from the designers’ point of view. The booklet texts are new, and cumulatively form the framing essay or exegesis for the works and the process of making them. Each starts with a reflection on a particular topic, which is an attempt at a conclusion or summary set of principles. This is generally written in the third person, but the examples or evidence is always specific, written from a particular instance of my/our experience. This type of creative enterprise is inherently collaborative, and hence there is an interchangeability or equivalence between “I” and “we” in the first-person texts and accounts of projects.

The booklets each finish with a section “Discussion” in which selected works of others which have been important or influential in the process of designing are noted. Taken together, these sections form a literature review and project review for the document as a whole. Each work is discussed as part of a living field or community of works which inform and relate to our own works, and I have chosen to discuss quite specific aspects of each example to explain their relationship to the topic of the particular booklet, even though each work referred to has multiple layers of relevance. I hope that taken as a whole, read perhaps both backwards and forwards, these layers and the matrix of connections between them are made evident.
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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.

Nigel Bertram

27 August 2010
The collection and arrangement of previously published and built works, interspersed with reflections on topics which have arisen through the doing of those works, is done with the aim of putting forward an idea about urban architecture. It attempts to make clear a line of thinking which has been implicit in the individual works produced over the past ten years, but perhaps not fully articulated. This argument is to be understood, however, not as a historical account, but in the present: as the current iteration of a cumulative position, developing continuously through the repeated act of doing projects and working with others.

The works and thoughts shown are the result of many years of collaborative efforts, involving a large number of co-authors – most notably my two equal practice partners at NMBW Architecture Studio; Marika Neustupny and Lucinda McLean, with whom I have been working continuously since 1991. All of our works are genuine collaborations. Shane Murray and Kim Halik are also long-term collaborators and colleagues, who share authorship of significant pieces within this collection, and with whom ideas have been developed over time and repeated teaching and thinking together. It is important to say that I am not speaking here on behalf of the practice of NMBW, or for any of the other individual collaborators, whose views may well diverge from those expressed here. There is room for others to tell their own stories, and make their own connections, draw their own conclusions from the same or an overlapping set of pieces. There are plenty of other stories to tell.

Collaboration itself is also the subject matter of this work. This is a mode of practice that we have actively sought out, defended and maintained. Even though practices of multiple authorship within a design practice, joint-supervision of research candidates and team-teaching of design studios are highly ‘inefficient’ in terms of hours spent, other types of efficiencies come from the richness of contributions and multiplying effect of working with different collaborators and students across a range of projects. This type of work - based on iteration, wandering, repeated re-looking, re-drawing, discussion, re-visiting and reflecting – simply would not be possible without working in this type of collaborative way. As well as collaborations with co-authors, colleagues
and students, there are of course simultaneous collaborations with clients, with different sites and places, with local traditions, regulations and ways of doing things, and in a more abstract way with the traditions and built evidence of architecture and architectural culture at large.

There is a productive tension in collaboration which requires constant re-evaluation, negotiation and balancing. This process is familiar to any architect, as all buildings are collaborative efforts, built by teams and made by many authors. The architect is a negotiator, and the process of architecture is in itself a kind of juggling and balancing of different and often competing requirements to find a point of clarity or resolution. The aim of the works and working methods which will be described here is to achieve this resolution in an ‘open’ manner - without closing down or reducing the overall potential energy of the ingredients.

This collection and arrangement (this work) contains three simultaneous and ongoing subsets or bodies of work that overlap but are also able to be isolated:

a: a series of investigations into how the urban environment is made;

b: a series of investigations into how the urban environment is used; and

c: a series of proposals for making and using that same environment.

The fact that these three are happening together is important. They are not sequential activities, but able to dynamically influence each other. The investigations of the first two categories are each also propositions, and the propositions of the third category, which make up the bulk of the work documented here, are each also investigations.

This process of inter-influence is possible due to another type of sustained juggling: that of ongoing and simultaneous research, teaching and building; of the dual roles of practitioner and academic. These two roles sit naturally together in terms of the discipline of architecture, but are frequently administratively considered in opposing or competing terms.

Leon Van Schaik has defined the practitioner-academic in the context of RMIT in his book *Design City Melbourne* (2006, pp.128-136). See also the section on NMBW in the same volume (pp. 218-223).

There are many precedents for this type of approach, and many who have personally influenced me: Locally, the atelier-office of Edmond & Corrigan (with whom I worked from 1992-93) has maintained a physical adjacency to RMIT for thirty years, and Peter Corrigan has sustained the teaching of undergraduate design studios whilst also producing major built works over this entire period.

In Perth, Simon Anderson has maintained a steady output of built works, produced from within the University of Western Australia and clearly articulated as research propositions and inquiries into ways of living and building. Alex Selenitsch at the University of Melbourne has similarly produced a regular series of built works, exhibitions, drawings and objects in the medium of architecture whilst holding an academic position, teaching and writing about the act of doing those works in order to disseminate the research propositions and conclusions. Currently at RMIT most of my colleagues and peers in the Architecture Program are engaged in similar mixture of activities, and this is increasingly seen as an enduring mode rather than a pragmatic or temporary condition.

In Japan, where Marika Neustupny and I lived and worked from 1998-99, we were fortunate to have contact with a lineage of dedicated practitioner-academics at the Tokyo Institute of Technology: from Kazuo Shinozaka to Kazunari Sakamoto to Yoshiharu Tsukamoto + Momoyo Kajima/Atelier Bow-wow. This group and their peers have contributed much to the contemporary understanding of Tokyo as an urban environment through sustained and reflective building, teaching and researching from within the University, widely disseminated and articulated in a clearly propositional way through publications and writing. These particular examples have been profoundly influential on the way in which I have come to understand architectural practice. The life and work of Alison and Peter Smithson, understood through their extensive writings, architectural projects large and small, ongoing teaching and repeated inquiries and insights into old and new urban environments is another reference point, and a source of influence and inspiration. There are of course many others locally and internationally, which underlines the existence of the practitioner-academic as a ‘type’, with a particular role to play within architectural culture, and a particular contribution to make to society at large.
Side of Commonwealth Bank property, Dimboola 2001
This document is a collection of observations and distillations. The subject matter is drawn from the everyday urban environment. We are continuously, and simultaneously, inhabiting and re-making this environment. Through the dynamics of our use and interaction it is constantly being modified, whether on a large or small scale, visibly or invisibly. The way in which the urban environment is made/re-made and used/re-used is the subject of the work.

The term "urban environment" refers to a total sum of parts understood as a single, interrelated but non-organic system. This includes infrastructure, buildings, plants, constructed landscapes, fittings, people, signs, things, vehicles, etc, etc. "Urban" is also not restricted to metropolitan conditions. The term is used here to denote all constructed space, from agricultural fields to suburbs to country towns to large conurbations (but excluding wild or truly natural space). All of these environments are combinations of a similar set of elements, only in a different arrangement or to a different degree.

If the urban environment is understood as being continually in flux, then every action, from pulling up a chair, to gardening, to constructing a new building, to driving a car can be considered as a renovation, or the adjustment of a previous condition. It also follows that the existing state of affairs has a certain authority – simply because it is there. An existing condition, taken as a totality at a certain point in time, describes the combined set of forces (economic, social, historical, political, natural, chance…) which caused it to exist. Looking carefully and analytically at existing conditions in real time can teach us about the forces that produced them. Learning from the city in this way helps make more finely-tuned decisions and strategies in the ongoing act of making and using it.

There have of course been innumerable and detailed previous studies of the existing built fabric, organisation and behaviour of cities and suburbs, infrastructures and landscapes. What is particular to this collection of studies is firstly their location - their specific place and time; and secondly their method - the way in which the study has taken place. This ‘way’ refers to the type of study, its selection of precise subject matter, and to the medium through which it occurs: looking, analysing, documenting, teaching and building. The process of learning from the city whilst simultaneously making and using it has been considered as an interdependent cycle. Each of the works in this collection, whether analytical or built, is a study; a reflective observation of what exists, but also a modification of that condition/ the creation of something that was not there before.

The process starts by looking for openings; looking for a way in. Gaps or discontinuities in logic are useful types of openings which allow new thoughts to find a place. Openings (possibilities, gaps, unresolved conditions) are also characteristic of what might be called an ‘open’ environment, as will be discussed in the following sections. Seeking out openings is a way of seeking out ‘openness’, and a delaying or deferral of closure. Thought of in this way, the aim of each work as arranged here is to locate (find) and maintain (keep) both openings and openness in the specific environment of that work.

Walking around the city with our eyes open, we act like ‘urban detectives’. Historian and architect Terinobu Fujimori coined this term with the ‘Tokyo Architectural Detective Agency’ in 1974 and with the subsequent ROJO Society collected over decades a range of carefully selected evidence, from humorous chance assemblages to previously unnoticed but beautiful fragments of infrastructure, landscape and building (ROJO is short for a term that translates as “roadway observation study”). Venturi, Scott-Brown and Izenour,
in *Learning from Las Vegas* also saw and collected things that others had missed in their haste to get out of the ‘ugly’/debased commercial environment. They were able to demonstrate the strip’s logic and validity as a system by looking coldly and analytically at their subject matter (but also creatively and projectively, with a certain delight in the forbidden). Kaijima, Kuroda and Tsukamoto in *Made in Tokyo* and subsequent projects draw on Venturi and Scott-Brown, ROJO and others to define a manner of looking ‘flatly’ at their environment, looking without prejudice in order to see through the blind spots of pre-judgement. Their willingness to treat the “*da-me* (no good) architecture” of Tokyo seriously provoked a new definition and understanding of what that city is, based simply on looking carefully and creatively at what was directly in front of them.

Richard Sennett has defined ‘openness’ as an essential quality of a vibrant and real public realm. He discusses the public realm as a process; something which is participated in and evolves over time. Open systems (those in unstable evolution), are contrasted with closed systems (those in harmonious equilibrium) and the inherent dynamic tension of the former is argued as liberating for a participatory urban environment. He also challenges architects and planners with the value of “incomplete form” as a political act – physical structure which is somehow loose in specification and ‘flexible’ enough to accommodate and encourage difference: multiple interpretations and uses by different individuals over time. (Richard Sennett, “The Public Realm”, 2008). Exactly how this is to occur, however, is left open.

Looking for openings can also be understood as a strategy for practice. Openings are places where things are less-crowded, where no-one is looking. Team sports players know this, and talk of both creating and using openings. By looking at what exists in a careful way, by studying and building such things as fences, small country towns, farms, side walls, informal events, chairs and tables; by suggesting that removal or not acting can be a strategic, feasible and even desirable course of action, at a time focussed on urban expansion, densification and growth is one way of creating an opening for something new to occur. This practice is similar to that of artists moving to neglected parts of the city (whether by choice or necessity) and transforming these places over time into something that others can also see value in.
Melbourne GPO, demolition
2003

Fitzroy Town Hall, reconstruction
2001
The introductory text in this booklet, and those which follow, can also be read as a type of conclusion; as these were written and conceived after, not before, the works under discussion were done.

While going through the act of collecting and arranging the found conditions of these works, an idea started to emerge. This gathers around concepts of ‘deflection’: and the act of deflecting as a strategy. By deflection I mean the glancing movement or bending of focus from one singular point, conclusion or object; diverting attention strategically away from the thing itself. If each of the works (including this one) is a ‘study’, then it is not a theory. If each of the works if focussed internally and reaches a precise (built, printed) conclusion, it is also a provisional conclusion, always with the aim of maintaining openness for another study, and so on. If each of these works is a focus, it also deflects that focus away from itself – towards other things, pointing things out, which are then also changed and enabled because this deflection has occurred.

Within the practice we have discussed many times the strategy of concentrating on the very large (urban) scale and very small (material/ experiential) scale as a method of avoiding or bypassing the middle scale which is the usual scale and preoccupation of architecture. This middle scale is that of the ‘object’, the whole thing, in isolation and complete. It is the scale on which form is often studied, modelled, considered and communicated. By comparison, the very large is the scale of infrastructure, or shared metropolitan systems, and the very small is the scale of furniture, or personalised and highly-responsive micro-environments.

The middle scale of architecture is also the scale of beaurocracy: it is the frame on which town planning applications are considered and understood; it is the scale of regulation, of massing, of envelope and also of ‘image’: understood in a singular, gestural way. If, however, we consider an action or strategy in terms of its impact and consequences on a broader urban-environmental field, then much of the nuance of this scale of beaurocracy becomes lost, unperceivable or irrelevant. If we consider architecture in terms of what is actually experienced by people at a given point in time, then in many cases the whole is also irrelevant, or invisible and obscured, by the foci of everyday inhabitation. Often, the minute and immediate actions of people and things at the level of experience flies under the radar of beaurocracy and control, which remains focussed on the static totality of the whole.

But defining things precisely at the middle-scale of the whole is the architect’s task. We need to decide on and then describe exactly where things go, how big things are, what they are made of; in order that they can be understood, approved, priced and made (within the established systems of the democratic/ commercial city). One aim of the works collected here has been to investigate ways in which actions and decisions can be made logically and precisely, but in a way that also encourages other things to happen; that does not limit or define absolutely the meaning, interpretation or potential inhabitation of spaces; that leaves room for and encourages appropriation and customisation (active engagement) in the everyday urban realm. In order to do this it is necessary to continually study ways in which such things as customisation and appropriation occur (how the urban environment is used), and also continually reflect upon the nature and potential of the fundamental decisions and limits that everyday architecture entails; aspects such as spatial organisation, structure, expression, materials, fittings (how the urban environment is made).
In pursuit of this, the overall balancing/ juggling of forces and competing requirements that is the process of architecture can also be seen as a strategy for producing outcomes which although precise, remain open and contingent. Thinking of the urban field as an ‘environment’ means that we are always thinking of our actions not as isolated or complete in themselves, but in combination with other actions; the actions of others.

Working combinations of:
- Small things and big things
- Hard things and soft things
- Permanent things and impermanent
- Designed things and undesigned things
- Resolved things and unresolved things

It follows that any new thing that we make, any ‘renovation’ of an existing condition, is already a composite entity.

A composite of:
- urban and architectural
- designed and undesigned
- the things that we found and the things that we made
- what is of the place and what we bring to it
- physical structure and active human inhabitation

We want to be conscious of this composite nature; to bring it to the foreground as subject matter.

We have found that one way of doing this is to work simultaneously at a number of levels, a number of scales, and to find methods for looking not only at what is right in front of us (the thing itself), but also to the edges of that thing – to the periphery. Working at extremities is a type of technique for resisting the central focal pull of the object being made, the thing under our own control.

**Peripherality**

Working at extremities (of scale, etc)

In terms of the three categories/ bodies of work set up at the start of this section (refer page 1.2), this notion can be further specified as:

a: simultaneously thinking about concrete material effect/ rules of architecture and the abstract legal/ organisational constructs of urban planning

b: speculating on little ecosystems of micro-effect (inhabitation, customisation) in relation to macro-scale urban infrastructures and landscapes

c: actively suppressing the middle-ground of form/gesture in order to deflect attention towards urban-landscape role and direct, tactile experience.

So we might say that in this work structure (architecture) is deflected towards furniture and infrastructure – or it is trying to establish relations in these directions. It seems that it is ironically only by focusing intently on the nature of the structure, on the precise way in which it is made and the logic of its construction and organisation that such a deflection is possible. The following sections seek to illustrate aspects of this argument.

FURNITURE  <  (STRUCTURE)  >  INFRASTRUCTURE
BIBLIOGRAPHY OF INCLUDED PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED WORKS
(Chronological order, by date of completion)

Division and Multiplication
Nigel Bertram & Kim Halik
Melbourne: RMIT University Press 2002
Bates Smart Award for Architecture in the Media
Australian Institute of Architects (Vic) Awards, 2003

By-Product-Tokyo
Nigel Bertram, Shane Murray, Marika Neustupny
Melbourne: RMIT University Press, 2003

Somers House
NMBW Architecture Studio
Leon van Schaik, "NMBW", in Design City Melbourne, Chichester: Wiley-Academy, 2006, pp.218-223.
Best Building Conversion Award
South East Development, Architectural Excellence in the South-East Awards, 2005

North Fitzroy House
NMBW Architecture Studio
Architecture Award: Residential Architecture Alterations and Additions
Australian Institute of Architects (Vic) Awards, 2005

Pioneer Museum Plaza
NMBW Architecture Studio + RMIT Urban Architecture Laboratory
Delia Teschendorff, “Pioneer Museum Plaza”, in Landscape Architecture Australia, No.120, November 2008, pp.56-58.
Architecture Award: Small Architecture category
Australian Institute of Architects (Vic) Awards, 2008
The Regional Prize
Australian Institute of Architects (Vic) Awards, 2008

Elwood House
NMBW Architecture Studio
Architecture Award: Residential Architecture Alterations and Additions
Australian Institute of Architects (Vic) Awards, 2008

RMIT Building 45
NMBW Architecture Studio
Architecture Award: Public Architecture Alterations and Additions
Australian Institute of Architects (Vic) Awards, 2009

Lyons Office
NMBW Architecture Studio
Architecture Award: Interior Architecture
Australian Institute of Architects (Vic) Awards, 2010

Fitzroy Apartments
NMBW Architecture Studio

Moonee Ponds House, 2004-5
Curlew House, 2005-9
Sorrento House, 2007-10
RMIT Building 88, 2009-10 (in association with Spowers)
SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

Note: this is the bibliography of selected works and projects actively read and referred to during the process of designing, and of those texts and images specifically referenced in this document. It is not intended to be a comprehensive bibliography for any building type, architectural approach or urban design theory.


Photographs and drawings

All photographs and drawings are by the author unless noted otherwise. Photographs and drawings by collaborators and students are captioned individually throughout the document. Professional architectural photography for published works is credited at the end of each project folio section. Drawings and incidental images in project folio sections by NMBW Architecture Studio.

Images sourced from publications/ other:


p7.22 Nakao, *Critic #4: Hiroshi Nakao*


p11.23 (upper) Lacaton & Vassal, 2G No.21, pp.26-27.

p11.23 (lower) Sakamoto, *House: Poetics in the Ordinary*, p.82.


p15.20 courtesy of Gallery Vision’s, Tokyo and Hiroshi Nakao


p15.23 (lower) John Gollings, courtesy of Edmond & Corrigan

p16.2-3 courtesy of Ricardo Flores & Eva Prats

Conversation with Kim Halik: pp16.4 - 16.20:

Fig. 2 *Architecture in Australia*, Vol.62 No 2, 1973

Fig. 5 www.almendron.com, viewed August 2010

Fig. 6 *Aardvark II, The RMIT Guide to Contemporary Melbourne Architecture*, 1993, p.112.

Fig. 8 Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, p.115.

Fig. 9 Alison and Peter Smithson, *The Charged Void: Architecture*, Monacelli Press, 2001, p.241.

Fig. 10 van den Heuvel & Risselda, *Alison and Peter Smithson: From the House of the Future to a House of Today*, p.160.

Fig. 11 Peter Bennetts

Fig. 12 National Library of Australia, online catalogue, viewed August 2010


Fig. 17 RMIT University Library slide collection

Fig. 18 www.theage.com.au, viewed August 2010
Servants quarters, Como House, Melbourne 2003
This research started not in the library, but by wandering around the city: looking at the buildings on our own doorstep, in Carlton, Fitzroy, Abbotsford, Clifton Hill…

We became interested in the everyday buildings of these inner suburbs, and the way they appeared individually and in groups. What we were looking at was not discussed in the books we could find on this architecture.

Looking carefully at the development of subdivisions in Carlton, we noticed that the originally self-similar plot boundaries soon became highly irregular in the way they were subdivided and built upon, and we started searching for remnants of these boundaries and informal micro-divisions in the field.

It became clear that the rules of the buildings being made and the rules of city planning were sometimes at odds with each other, particularly on the corners of urban blocks, or at other moments of intersection between different conditions. Rather than being a problem, this created a multiplicity of interesting and unusual responses.

DIVISION AND MULTIPLICATION

This booklet is about dividing things, about how to divide.
Architecture certainly creates separations. Is it also thereby concerned with an act of division? This research presupposes the latter as an elementary condition.

At this point, we will do no more than list some attributes of what we refer to by the use of these terms. Division concerns the use of land/territory/urban space; division creates territory (habitable and non-habitable space); division is differentiation—it creates the difference between habitable and non-habitable, for example, but also the idea of this difference; division is a basic limit of both building and social existence.

On the other hand, multiplication is contained within division, in the sense that dividing produces multiplicity.

We would also say that division is unavoidable, even if this might sound disappointing. The alternative, a space without boundaries, is not only perhaps utopian but beyond the limits of language: we always remain in language, having to decide between one space and another, between one limit and another, not outside all limits or distinctions.

We would like to discuss the above from a formal but not necessarily formalistic viewpoint, but, above all, in the medium provided by the world of buildings. But form presupposes use. Any form contains traces of how it came to be, but also of how it is used: occupied, modified, manipulated, etc., in the present. These modifications, usages contain an intelligible quotient—our understanding of things is congruent with their value as instruments. Usages, habitations, habituations: we emphasize the cognitive value of what is presented.

Through the buildings, through their materiality, in the many and varied built situations which this booklet studies, there is provided a means of thinking about actions and things in our immediate world.

This 100 X 200 block after private re-subdivision, 1896. Uniformity dissolved by speculation.

Hoddle's original 1/4-acre blocks of subdivision, Carlton, 1852. Urban block as theoretical schema.

The same block, after private re-subdivision, 1896. Uniformity dissolved by speculation.

1852 built form overlaid on 1852 subdivisions. Unforeseen architectures.
The predominant terrace-type buildings occupy long, narrow sites – sharing the valuable but limited street frontage on deep blocks, that would be able to (and sometimes do) take much larger buildings quite comfortably.

These buildings are made up of a number of parts, working from front to back of the site. The sequence of parts is always similar, but the size, shape, width and height of each part is infinitely variable, adjusting to opportunity and circumstance. Proportion is not a concern.

GROUPS

Any city is made up of subdivisions of land. On this essentially legal foundation, a built fabric comes into being whose relation to the division of territory is not one of simple cause and effect. Subdivisions and buildings make a complex and interrelated whole. The richness of this manifold, and its mystery, revealed always through the study of an individual built case, and not some abstract generalisation, is the subject of this work.

A hypothetical process of subdivision would lead you to believe that the city would end up as an homogeneous repetition of similar elements. But it is interesting to note that inner Melbourne, if you look at it carefully, never actually displays this kind of homogeneity. Particularly in relation to the buildings which form the subject of this study, what predominates is a series of distinct groupings or parts. The group is not the same type of entity as, say, an urban block, but it could be a block, a single building, or even part of a building. Basic to the group is that it is made up of parts. What comes to the foreground in this study is the relationships between these parts. The problems are in the end linguistic, in the way that grammar can be seen as a study of the relationships between words.

A group is made up of units but is not simply the extension or repetition of a unit. To this extent, the group is a singularity. A group has limits. It is not able to be extrapolated into a ‘rule’ or a city (or if it is, it immediately changes in sense). The group presupposes discontinuity. Finally, these groups are actual parts of the city, not abstract or ideal entities. The group is an event that gives rise to a separate idea, an idea which comes into being and is only possible because of the group.
We collected specific moments which we thought the most clearly
descriptive, or self-evident. One set of examples are small corner
buildings, where it is possible to see front, side and back all together,
without the usual separation, decorum or hierarchies of address and
frontage. On the corner, the inner workings of the block are revealed
on its surface, making a mixed condition.

In order to describe this, a method of drawing was developed
which showed front, back and side equally, highlighting the concrete
differences between different types of abstract boundary and different
occupations of the space of a plot. The drawings do not show context
but show the effect of context.

We can talk about groups on many
different scales, however, what we find
in Melbourne is that they are generally
quite small. One idea never lasts too
long. Regardless of the real historical and
political basis behind this condition, the
circumstance indicates that conflict between
an incredible variety of interests is inherent
in the speculative city, that it is composed
of these conflicts rather than governed by a
single overarching will or agreed direction.
Perhaps a positive role for the group exists
within this situation of discontinuity: that
of negotiating differences. Groups manage
difference without eliminating it. The
process of division differentiates between
tings, and groups join them back together.

DRAWING

Scouring archives or building records
was not how we started this research. It
came out of our wandering around the city.
We look at buildings, becoming aware of
what is local, what is prosaic, trying not to
let generic understandings blind us to the
infinite variety of the particular. We think
that the particular cases studied reveal
certain critical things about the process of
dividing and occupying space, particular
qualitative dimensions of the idea of
division.

These buildings have perhaps never
been drawn. They are outside of the drawn
culture of architecture. To draw them
is not simply to record evidence, but to
fashion a language, a form of engagement.
Necessarily, then, this engagement must be
as much invention as it is documentation.
The drawings are the research, produced to
develop ways of studying particular issues.
Our drawing in this booklet is another form
of grouping. We draw things in different
ways and combinations, and this itself
becomes a way of finding new things.
Sometimes these buildings make small groups, joined together into a shared idea or goal. But in Melbourne such continuity or agreement remains sporadic and highly variegated, with edges exposed. The small group sits between the single dwelling and the urban block, in a relationship to the original larger blocks of subdivision.

Within each group there is also a series of parts, which work across the logic of separate individual sites, establishing sideways relationships to do with ways of building and occupying the site, but without literally sharing space or connecting functionally. Tall street buildings at the front, a scramble of low sheds and services at the back. Sometimes parts of groups do get joined back together, renovated as a restaurant or other new entity, modified and re-modified over time.

Where such buildings as these do appear in books, at the limits of an art-historical discussion, they are generally categorised in terms of style or as a part of a chronology. This discussion of style is really one of taste, but it also contains the notion of a ‘vernacular’, which is thought to lie somehow outside of style. But we are not searching in these ordinary buildings for any ‘natural’ or unselfconsciously vernacular qualities. Rather, we are trying to look flatly at what exists in front of us, in something like the manner of an archaeologist. The figure of the archaeologist also suggests detachment from the body of history and from empathy. More so than the historian, the work of the archaeologist engages quite directly with the here-and-now of what remains.

Remnants, bones without flesh—thematically, this also signals the manner of observation. These buildings are products of a lapsed history. Inserted into the present, stripped of their holistic historical reasons for being, they focus our attention more intensely on the bare linguistic elements, the manner of their composition and recomposition.
The straightforward methods of building mean that even larger ensembles are made up of a grouping of small parts. Hotels are similar to a group of terrace houses, although public in nature, with a number of separate rooms each with a different door to the street. Structural divisions exist in a relationship with social divisions.

We were interested in the robustness and anonymity of these buildings, their directness and builderliness, their ability to be changed and re-used. The logic of the making of each part, the logic of the grouping of parts into buildings, and of separate buildings into groups, and the logic of the composite urban experience are not the same. In the gaps between simple sets of things, a great diversity and inventiveness occurs.

What is important to us is not the historical period to which these examples belong, but the critical stance they show. Tying the subjects of this study together is a certain commonness of spirit, an ethic of design. All of them tend to rely on selection from relatively few elements. Each solves a specific formal problem through judicious modification and sometimes stubborn reliance on a limited vocabulary. Inherent in them is a tension — we would say a productive tension — between a limited repertoire of materials and ways of building and increasingly complex social groupings and situations.

We looked at all this with the detached eye of an archaeologist, but also with the practical and optimistic eye of one who would like to build. Perhaps it might yet be possible to extend the field of what exists? Our approach to making openings within this field starts through the application of a precise but also interpretive type of observation to the modification and alteration of the known.

The examples studied in this booklet are presented in the spirit of looking again at things which may have become overly familiar. Looking again, with unfamiliar eyes, in order to think.
FRAGMENTS OF ANALYSIS

One striking aspect of the New World city is its dependence upon the idea of land. Land and the availability of land represent perhaps one of its founding myths. The process by which land is divided, classified, bought and sold is of great interest to the cultural historian. However, in this study we wish to focus on its technical, physical and spatial implications. Unlike the situation in Europe, the process of subdivision in Melbourne – predominantly something administrative – was always quite distinct from the process of building. In the colonial city, building and planning are radically separate acts. Reserves for public buildings, for example, are architecturally blank spaces; Hoddle planned for a city, Melbourne, the architecture of which could not be foreseen.

Nevertheless, the city was built, and we obviously experience this built reality – the buildings and the subdivision together – as a whole. In what sense, then, can we understand the interaction between the subdivision of a lot and the process of building? What logic belongs to this relationship, and what are the results and effects of the combination of these two fundamental parameters? The split between subdividing and building is not necessarily cause for concern. Perhaps it is the very separation between the subdivisonal and the constructive that provides the result with its richness.

In the following groups of analysis, what is at issue is a series of very particular linguistic problems. Given a limited formal vocabulary of building elements and a highly regular urban framework, the buildings in this study tend to highlight, often in a particularly dramatic way, the gaps or the elisions in this system, unresolved moments, points of ‘weakness’, as they exploit opportunities for the creation of new combinations. None of these analyses gives a definitive answer to the question of this relationship between building and subdividing. Rather, they suggest its complexity and indicate that the ‘solution’ is the possibility of yet another arrangement.

ABOUT THE DRAWINGS

The drawings that follow make no claim to scientific accuracy or historical or philological completeness. Our aim is only to suggest a set of relationships or congruences between similar or dissimilar elements. The process of editing what the drawings show has the power to modify their content. Nevertheless, this process is not wild or arbitrary. In each case, a good deal of effort has been made to record accurately the complete picture. Where there are gaps in the data, what is missing has been substituted with what we might imagine to be the case. Our criteria in most cases has been not only logical consistency, but also something perhaps more vague – experience or imagination.

We considered items such as fences, clotheslines, sheds, signs, function to have equal value to the primary buildings as far as the use of the land is concerned. To the casual observer, the subject buildings in their present state might present a highly ad-hoc image. The aim of the process of drawings has been to represent this state as clearly as possible.

Each documentary section shows three types of information: the photographic image, site plan and architectural projections show respectively the materiality, urban subdivision and dimensional aspects of the object itself. A location reference is also given to allow the reader to continue the process in the field for themselves.

The isometrics show how a particular piece or segment of land is three-dimensionally divided, organised, occupied (and not occupied), built upon (and not built upon), used. Hence, this type of representation attempts to show ‘everything’ relating to the above situation. What occurs outside the frame, however, has been bracketed out. The context, the supporting environment can only be inferred, deduced. On the other hand, the absence of the context is equal value to the primary buildings as far as the use of the land is concerned. To the casual observer, the subject buildings in their present state might present a highly ad-hoc image. The aim of the process of drawings has been to represent this state as clearly as possible.

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Division and Multiplication
Nigel Bertram, Kim Halik
2000 - 2002

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High Commendation, National
Book Award
Building Science Forum of
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3. INTERSECTIONS

We have been interested in pursuing a process of re-looking very carefully at what exists in our particular cities, in their everyday built environment. The purpose of looking and re-looking is to first of all gain an accurate understanding of what is the case (as much as is possible, free of presupposition and prejudice) working from first principles and evidence on-the-ground. Secondly, the purpose of looking analytically is to uncover something of the logic behind appearances, the forces that produce certain visible effects.

A number of people have looked at ordinary buildings and parts of the city before, and carried out research projects which involve drawing and measuring and re-photographing, but the particular focus of the work presented here is the intersection between an architectural logic and an urban logic, and the locating of points (‘pressure points’) where two systems which have different reasons or different rules come into contact with each other. These small kernels of tension reveal things about the environment as a whole.

One principle that has become clearer over the course of doing this type of investigation is that it is at the point where a system breaks down, or requires modification in order to continue, that its operating principles (and limits) are able to be seen most clearly. This is not understood as a failure, but rather as an inherent property of any (non-organic) environment. We need to know the rules in order to break the rules, perhaps, but one way of studying rules is to see how they have been broken. Looking at the points where a certain logic breaks down is one way of seeing or clarifying what is hidden through familiarity, or taken for granted. Looking at simple urban systems, such as vernacular building methods, allows the way in which those systems operate to be more easily seen because they break down and require modification more often.

The book Division and Multiplication, produced in collaboration with Kim Halik, is a series of case studies and analyses of very particular parts of inner Melbourne. It started by simply walking around the city and noticing things. In Parkville – a very
intact and precious nineteenth-century area – there is all of a sudden this moment of severity or ‘blindness’ where one comes across a fifty metre long section of blank wall and backyard fence in the street. We were drawn to this on a purely physical, material level; it is quite beautiful. You can read the logic of the bluestone foundation, the brick boundary-wall and the thin copper water-pipe which travels from front water meter to back yard, and the garden trees appearing over the back fence. But we were also interested in why this should occur.

We began to delve into this and look for the reasons – for the system which could have produced such an effect; where you have an area of very valuable street frontage taken up by ‘nothingness’, or a section of interior that was conceptually never meant to be seen. So we started looking at this idea of how the logic of urban planning, which is really a legal construct and an abstract idea of property and title, might come into contact with a concrete building tradition in which we could identify certain principles. These are buildings which are by necessity stretched out over long thin parcels of land, and develop certain properties such as ‘elasticity’. Probably the important diagram is where the Hoddle grid, which works perfectly well in the higher-density CBD or in outer suburbia as a quarter-acre block pattern, strikes some problems in the inner suburbs – in this middle condition. Because the buildings are not big enough to fill the sites, unless you have a hotel or other building type which fits the corner, you end up with a problem: a dilemma of address.

This process then became documented through the identification and recording of moments where points of tension in the actual urban environment became apparent. We tried to pin-point a number of cases where this relationship could be described in almost a single image or a single drawing. The buildings are drawn in ways perhaps in which they had not been drawn before. Drawing in quite an abstract way and thinking about this relationship between the abstract construct of something and the physical, raw, material reality of it: we were trying to hold in our heads at the same time these two things, being intrigued by the way in which things are put together, and the system which creates the need for that to happen.

It is worth pointing out that this type of investigation, whilst producing in some ways a study of certain building types, is different to a ‘typological study’. The rules and characteristics of the terrace-house type, for example, are widely known and have been well-documented. These rules are usually expressed in terms of general principles of organisation and construction, perhaps related to available technology and social norms of the period in which the practice arose and developed. But in none of the studies on terrace-houses I am aware of has there been a chapter on ‘the problem of the corner’, which is the subject of Division and Multiplication. This is firstly because the specificity of this problem arises due to the particular scale and combination of Melbourne’s block size and building density (a product of historical and economic circumstance), and also because typological studies generally consider rules rather than exceptions. So, for example, whereas a generalised application of terrace building typology might suggest rebuilding or ‘repairing’ presumed continuous streetscapes, the study of corner problems in Division and Multiplication suggests that backyard gaps and holes in the street wall are an inherent part of inner Melbourne’s logic and structure – and part of the reason why these areas feel the way they do.
Front and back yards together

Front yards and back yards play different roles in the suburbs, categorising things into those which are on public display and those which are hidden from view or to do with services. The traditional architectural treatment of each is correspondingly different. Inner Melbourne’s combination of block shape and building method means that these two worlds are frequently found in direct and abrupt adjacency. The raw potential (and energy) of this physical conundrum have provoked a multiplicity of site-specific responses.

Fitzroy, 2001
Abbottsford, 2001
Fifty-metre fence frontage

This terrace house in North Carlton has a 5-metre wide decorative facade facing prestigious Canning Street, but its much more prominent side also faces onto a busy thoroughfare. The blank but subtle side façade, with foliage of private trees seen over the fence and adding to the public realm is reminiscent of country town conditions, and in fact produced by the same urban structure.

A gap that can’t be filled

The apparent gap in this fragment of two-storey streetscape in Faraday St is actually a combination of the rear yard of the white corner terrace (6 metres), a service lane (3 metres), and a side setback to the brown building (2 metres). The street wall could not be made ‘continuous’ without substantial internal reconfiguring of both adjacent buildings, or sacrificing light, air and service yard/private open space. As with the other examples, the point of tension in the urban system is not the corner itself, but towards the rear of the first block just around the corner.
Orientation

The extreme ratio between front and side characteristic of the long strip lot, when combined with the strong elastic-directionality characteristic of these types of buildings, has the effect of making corners of each urban block quite difficult to resolve (in the absence of a large, squareish corner building type). The sudden exposure of normally hidden and mute party walls introduces a dilemma as to which direction a building on a corner should face. This is as much a linguistic as a formal or practical problem – a question of address and architectural representation, compounded by the fact that what is supposedly secondary occupies up to ten times as much surface area as what is primary. In a commercial situation, this extra exposure raises the basic issue of how to turn one address into two. Various compromise-formations make what could be described as partial or ‘indecisive’ corner buildings. Within the overall composition of this thin double-address, there remains a need to include frontage for rear yards and service spaces, and often the amount of real ‘front’ required is quite modest. Street surface ends up being shared between aspects of front, side and back, all appearing simultaneously rather than neatly separated into their respective zones.

Subdivision into strips produces uneven frontage and a dilemma of address.
Queenslanders

Few Australian building traditions have been more widely studied than the elevated Queensland timber house. There have been numerous measured drawings produced and historical books written accounting for the particular manners of these buildings, their construction techniques, or giving instructions on how to restore them. Some authors focus their reasoning on climatic concerns (the elevated timber floors and shaded perimeter verandahs allow easy cooling in a subtropical climate) while others claim that the high-set houses are due to termite infestation (more space underneath makes it easier to inspect for termites) or nineteenth-century notions of disease, where buildings were elevated to avoid the 'miasma' residing on the ground.

The experience of inner-suburban Brisbane, however, where a multitude of timber bungalows exist packed into a reasonably dense suburban rather than rural tropical landscape, contains a greater diversity of built solutions than can easily be explained by the above logic. The suburbs of Red Hill, Kelvin Grove and New Farm, taken as case studies, when looked at in plan or from the air appear regular and conform to a similar mid-density grid layout as might be found in Melbourne suburbs such as Northcote. From street level, however, the experience of this regularity is radically altered by the steep topography and the corresponding need to adjust each building’s siting, entry sequence, and so on to accommodate the intersection of this terrain with the regular system of land subdivision. The simple combination of a regular pattern of building with sites of either side-fall, cross-fall, fall towards the front, or fall towards the back, produces a multiplying effect of variation, possibilities and limitations; and this, combined with rampant vegetation serves to fragment each house from its neighbours, breaking up the repetitive aerial allotment pattern and reinforcing the detached, in-the-round quality of the elevated villa. It would seem plausible that one of the main reasons for elevated construction in Brisbane is pragmatic expediency – it is easier within timber construction techniques to elevate a regular structure over the ground rather than modify this structure to follow the ground or excavate the structure into the ground. Perhaps more importantly, given that this discontinuity between house and ground occurs, what does this produce, and how does this reveal other aspects of the ways these suburbs work?

Looking at the extremities/ at extreme conditions can teach us also about the everyday (things are more visible)... eg looking at industrial buildings where economy + efficiency are the only drivers teaches us about the ways in which economy and efficiency are at work in more mainstream buildings. Looking at the relationship of timber buildings to the ground on extremely sloping sites says something also about the way in which all timber buildings relate to their site... Looking at relatively crude structures can make certain things easier to see . . . more transparent/ laid bare...
House and slope (i)

A standard timber house and steeply sloping block make an extreme combination due to their completely straightforward and direct method of combination. The house is bluntly pushed to the ground at the entrance, with tall external stair added to link the back door to the yard. All else remains as if the slope did not exist. Across the road, the facing house has a similar siting strategy for a similarly-standard house, but this time the effect of the slope is in reverse, with external steps and escarpment eating into the public street reserve. Instead of facing each other in a conventional manner of a street, these two houses are completely dislodged from each other, increasing the floating sense of the freestanding, raised villa, and giving each a clear view to the distance.

Kelvin Grove, Brisbane
2007
Another extreme intersection between topography and urban planning. The narrow rectangular blocks accommodate long timber houses which are sited completely conventionally and regularly (in plan) despite their unusual circumstance. The combination of a simple, unmediated building type with topographic conditions produces remarkable new by-products in terms of scale, urban form, view and streetscape. Each building adjusts subtly and opportunistically through minor elements and additions, such as the back door becoming the primary entrance for the corner house, the addition of a grand almost public stair on the central house, and a block wall screening the ample space beneath for storage. The sense of three buildings as a group is amplified by their separation from the street.
Inside and outside

A typical double-fronted four-room plan is surrounded by verandah-type space of lower (sloped) ceiling height and lighter construction than the core of central rooms. Over time, the enclosed, divided and occupied verandah spaces have become the location of most of the essential equipment and furniture for daily life: bed, study desk, bathroom, kitchen, cooking space, robe, storage, dining table. The central area has become hollowed out and its rooms almost vacant; ceremonial and quiet spaces with internal windows to the denser and more active periphery. The elevated construction makes horizontal extension difficult, forcing internal compaction and division/ differentiation, concealed in a uniform external covering.
Over and under

Having raised the house above the flat site (more than the minimum required for accommodating ventilation and/or topography) a large space underneath is created, and fenced from the surrounding yard. This space becomes the shadowy ‘other’ of the house above. The chimney appears as a foundation, services such as washing machine and WC are installed (underneath wet areas above), and a combination of storage and informal use of furniture and other items such as dartboard, mirror, bicycles occurs. The raised house combines its official and unofficial uses and contents within a single compact volume, absorbing the role of outbuildings, lean-to’s or sheds.

Newfarm, Brisbane
2007
Contents and container

This warehouse near Ringwood is used for the storage and dispatch of steel sections. The building’s portal frame structure (shown in blue) is combined with, and braced by the steel crane system used for lifting and moving the contents around the shed (shown in yellow) making a type of hybrid of structure and furniture. This sense of combination is further amplified by the fact that the contents (various stacks and piles of steel) are also at times hard to distinguish from this ensemble, making a conglomerate or composite whole. The colour scheme of red and yellow paint markings for orientation, safety and identification of services add another overlay to this logical but ‘fuzzy’ visual and spatial environment.

DISCUSSION

The small publication *Rural and Urban House Types in North America* (Steven Holl, 1982) presents a beautifully drawn and precisely-edited collection of rural and urban ‘folk’ architecture. This publication was referenced by us in Division and Multiplication, not only for its modest size and shape – being a pamphlet rather than a book – but also in its instrumental, non-historical approach to its subject matter. Although it contains in its title the word ‘type’, Holl clarifies his particular understanding of this in his short text:

“The houses in this pamphlet are not meant to serve as models. They are presented collectively in order to illuminate a cultural and architectural interrelationship. 19th century interest in typology was a product of the belief that there could be a universal theory of architecture which would apply to all buildings, in all places, for all times. This investigation seeks to use typology in a more modest way within a relative view of culture.” (p.6) and later... “These houses present the notion of typology not as a method for citing precedent but as one for studying cause and effect.” (p.54)

The book presents a set of case studies, from blunt one-room houses to hybrid formations such as ‘Highway House’ and ‘Telescope house’, to more complex studies of the relationship between culturally-habitual and logical arrangements, such as ‘Flounder House’ (1). The physical evidence is described directly, with speculation as to a number of possible origins for such traditions.

In relation to the repeated and well-discussed links between modern and folk architecture (whether industrial, domestic or commercial vernacular, historical or contemporary), Holl discusses his approach as one of ‘observation’, through the example of Bartok:

“The work of composer and musicologist Bela Bartok provides an example of a method of observation similar to that used in this study: When Bartok traveled over the Hungarian countryside collecting folk music, he had in mind not just the contemplation of the peasant’s “pentatonic scale without semitones,” or the “isometric verses of four lines.” Bartok was interested in the permeation of modern music with genuine peasant music. Speaking of this he wrote: “We are concerned not only with achievements of purely scientific issues, but also those which have a stimulating effect on composers. According to the natural order of things, practice comes before theory.” (p.6)

A related delight in the strange but logical formations produced by particular practices of an urban environment can be found in the publication *Pet Architecture Guidebook* (Tokyo Institute of Technology Tsukamoto Architectural Lab & Atelier Bow Wow, 2001). The guidebook documents a series of tiny structures found across Tokyo, built on leftover slithers of land cut by infrastructure, on setbacks in front of or beside buildings, or produced as the by-product of road-widening (2). As with Holl’s collection, this book shows the ingenuity and ‘charm’ (foregrounded here by the cuteness of their small size) of a set of highly-customised vernacular constructions, built in response to particular culturally-specific and metropolitan physical/infrastructural conditions. The principles are shown through concrete examples, sorted into various overlapping categories, rather than as abstract diagrams or general concepts for emulation. The
authors very purposefully position the document as a ‘guidebook’ – avoiding generalizing or turning the notion ‘Pet Architecture’ into another theory, and instead focusing on the act of observing first-hand; inviting the reader to also wander around the city searching out these moments, and to enjoy the city as they do so (refer also to “Discussion” in Appropriations booklet, p5.23).

These two examples place importance on observation, collection and arrangement of found circumstances. Not neutrally or purely objectively, but also not without rigour. Observation, collection and arrangement are each creative and analytical acts. By focusing on a small but highly particular sub-sets of the whole metropolitan environment, certain clues and ways of working are revealed. By looking at such concrete crystallisations of both problem-solving and creative intent, not only is the customized, one-off delight of the end result able to be seen and appreciated, but also insights into larger complex questions of the metropolis and the forces which shape it are able to be retroactively gleaned. By showing and giving a name to certain phenomena (which everyone already somehow ‘knows’) a new existence and role for such phenomena is created:

“... We aimed to establish one new category in urban structure by giving them a certain name not by negatively considering them as openings and fragments. I have tentatively talked about this concept to different people, and surprisingly found that many of them tell me about “My Pet Architecture” existing in their daily lives such as “I found it there,” or “That could be a Pet Architecture.” Everyone seems to have seen unique buildings in town, and those buildings that are extremely small in size or narrow in width attract people. There is communication between human beings and buildings.” (p.9)
As visitors to an exotic and much-studied city, we were wary of our position as outsiders, blind to so much of what happens and why, but also able to see some things clearly due to our lack of intimacy. Rather than trying to work out the logic or meaning of the whole, we started this extended field-research by diving straight into the middle. Students commenced by catching a train into Shinjuku station, choosing an exit, and then working their way out through this aperture into the surroundings.

By focusing on areas of change or volatility in this environment, and perhaps because of our unfamiliarity, we were drawn naturally to locations and events where customisation or active involvement of individuals in the city was apparent. This included small and temporary phenomena, but could also be seen in structures of all scales. One thing that became apparent was that in Tokyo the very large and the very small exist together. We became interested in the informal or responsive characteristic of even some large infrastructures, and also in the way in which people interacted with formal parts of the city in an informal way.

NOTES ON AN INTERPRETIVE URBANITY:

Surrounding a small convenience store in Shimokitazawa is a 500mm-wide strip of land, housing an eclectic group of objects and activities. This leftover slither is exactly the sort of useless or wasted space normally discouraged by city councils and 'good' design guidelines, but in this case its peculiar nature accommodates perfectly the now traditional array of public-private functions surrounding the ubiquitous conbini.

Whether the strip itself or the idea for its use came first remains ambiguous, but the basic arrangement is similar to small buildings all over the metropolis. Small leftover gaps of private land between building and street, or building and building – resulting from the specific arrangement of land subdivision, methods of building and local regulations – are home to a range of semi-public interfaces. Gas meters, electrical poles, rubbish bins, public telephones, umbrella stands, bicycles, vending machines, pot plants, storage, personal decorations…

Such items fade into insignificance in the larger schemes of cities; they are rarely drawn by architects (except in order to control or hide them), are quietly removed before photographs are taken, or edited-out afterwards. But in the case of the conbini, twenty-four-hour operation means that these apparently ephemeral things are never put away. The building is never without them. The thin strip of land, in itself a non-presence or almost-nothing, gives rise to a seemingly ad-hoc appropriation that in turn defines both the physical image and the almost-public urban amenity of Tokyo’s convenience stores in general. It is now possible to conceive of uses and objects specifically designed for these spaces in front of convenience stores, and the particular role they play in the city.
The distribution of small things over a large field is evident in many forms, but perhaps the easiest to see is the network of vending machines. These items occupy small gaps around the edges of buildings, and can be found individually or clustered together into small ensembles, sometimes replacing the permanent architecture. The vending machines are somewhere between furniture and infrastructure or service and through their opportunistic logic of convenience and physical fit we can read openings and patterns of intensity.

Even though these items have been documented before, studying the system of vending machines in different locations became a type of comparative index, and evidence of both the continuity of this infrastructural network, and the creativity demonstrated in its customisation; through different physical manifestations of these everyday objects in relation to the specifics of place.
As well as studying more evenly distributed networks of small things, the research became increasingly drawn to precise moments in the metropolis where small and large came into contact; moments of pressure or ‘pinching’. Often these points were hardly visible or significant in any way other than their presence was able to be felt, or a ripple-like effect was noticed in the broader urban realm.

In west Shinjuku, for example, a grid of wide roads is separated by level at their intersections, allowing free movement in a straight-ahead direction (for a few blocks, at least), but making diagonal movements or turning corners very difficult. Almost as an afterthought, various small stairs are squeezed into gaps at these intersections, almost invisible to the casual observer. These apparently compromised spaces, however, were observed as the locations of the most customised and intense activity.
As the parts of the city we were noticing and drawing became smaller and smaller, the difference between the city environment and human bodies in it also became less. Individuals and groups of people could be seen effecting a direct and strong relationship with the public realm by co-ordinating their actions with the physical and spatial opportunities of the environment, including its light, sound, colour and movement.

Bottlenecks of circulation in a crowded area were targeted by pamphleteers due to the guaranteed intensity of passers-by to hand leaflets to. Protestors also with leaflets, banners, slogans and loud-hailers chose the narrowest point in a path for maximum exposure, reading inconvenience as an opportunity. Teams of promotional staff in matching jackets walk against the mass tide of pedestrians at a busy intersection, working with the repeated pulsing of vehicles and people.
We noticed that pure architectural form in Tokyo is difficult to see. It is always experienced and understood in combination with a mass of other things, so that no one part of the environment is exclusively dominant or independent. Signage is prolific across a wide range of scales: from mobile placards to stickers to whole buildings, but there is also a mass of other small things such as pot plants, decorations, bicycles, infrastructural wires and connections, fences, stacks of wood and other products in the street.

Buildings understood as singular entities tend to fade into the background in such a combinatory state. What is recorded and remembered instead is the immediate experience of the transaction or interaction, the precise composite moments where people, furniture, structure and system intersect. The drawings in this book record such combinations at a range of scales.

**Compression**

There is a certain moment, whilst crossing the bridge in front of Shinjuku station's south exit, where the crowd is funnelled through a point at the junction between two large plaza spaces and the adjacent sea of railway lines. It is also exactly at this moment that individuals within the crowd become identifiable enough to be available for face-to-face contact. A small group of protestors with a point to make and leaflets to disperse, choose this moment when the crowd is at both its most vulnerable and its most compact, to assert a disproportionately strong physical presence.

This is a cunning act of reading a found physical situation, and similarly to the opportunistic use of cracks in the west Shinjuku grid above, utilises a restriction in flow to create an opportunity for exposure. However, in this case the event of appropriation is defined by a 'live', fleeting theatre. The obvious physical compression of the funnel, and its parts, is another type of crack where both the point of a reading and the event are embedded in the production of interaction and strategic positioning. This is a structural type of tightness which is notional and non-corporeal; but nevertheless a perceptual and an immediate act. The police will another time, in response and as an act of compression, work in the manner in which is the bridge has become its own theatre.

4.12 4.13
In comparison with the more singular case of the convenience store in Shimokitazawa, this by-product event groups together a series of sub-elements which would otherwise have no apparent connection. A complex situation of different agendas and purposes has somehow become a whole, yet the manner in which this happens is transient and could disappear at any moment. Such acts of 'creative compression' or grouping of disparate urban effects make apparent the active nature of by-products.

Because by-product events require interpretation and individual involvement, they are moments of freedom and a type of localized empowerment. This is clearly shown in the case of the south Shinjuku rail yard edge. But the subjectivity that is part of interpretation means that by-products also have definite limits to their field of influence. It is impossible to have a 'system' of by-products. The moment of self-determination contained within an act of appropriation has boundaries. Although creative and generative, it is unable to be extrapolated. Perhaps because of its fundamentally derivative and dependent nature, a by-product is consigned to the here and now.

CLUES

So we are suggesting that these by-product events:
- point to and are produced by a gap between concept and situation;
- are acts of appropriation, triggered by a combination of ambiguity and excess, and;
- make a compressed whole from disassociated fragments, with a fleeting power.

Each of these attributes requires a type of speculation and interpretative action, with the active nature of by-products in the field of urbanism. On the one hand, this means that by-products are resistant to the very forces of urban morphing, in which our interpretations must work both against the perception of the newness of function and the lends of the site, and against a new, more stubborn notion of function. Type, site and the flux between the two are a way of rethinking knowledge, planning and policy making, and are referring to it through a new interpretation.

The by-product events documented in this book are all to some extent vernacular occurrences. As such, they are produced outside of our control, even those that harmonize. Even though our by-products are relatively small, they are immediately an act of appropriation, another point of view, these by-products are not difficult to deal with, even dangerous. But we are committed to becoming them, contaminating them or designing them. The discovery and subsequent consideration of these instances of things, and revaluation to think and work with them, is essential between things rather than things themselves. The unpredictability and constant newness of such occurrences keeps us on our toes.

But in order to be able to utilize the vernacular occurrence as a clue, it is necessary to distance oneself from the immediate appearance. If the delight of the research is in the discovery of these events, the real labour is contained in the analytical dissection of their workings. It is one thing to learn to love the world as we find it, and quite another to move towards harnessing this unconscious energy. We are not presenting this material as an alternative to conscious work, not losing ourselves in the dream-like qualities of ephemera, but instead trying to think clearly about the important role played by such things as ephemera and dream-like qualities. Our aim in this respect is a type of 'profane illumination'.

Nigel Bertram and Marika Neustupny, 2003
5. Appropriations

Cities are used, interacted with, appropriated and customised by people. The way in which this occurs in everyday life – the social logic of a situation - can be observed to be highly varied and indeterminate, without an absolute cause and effect relationship to the architectural and/or urban logic of the physical place. Certain environments encourage or discourage certain tendencies of use and behaviour, but there is always a degree of creativity, improvisation and randomness in the way in which individuals occupy, inhabit and create urban and architectural space.

This creative inhabitation through use is a type of ‘customisation’ – that is, the modifying of a given condition to suit the particular needs/desires of one person or group, without concern for general applicability or repeatability of this change. Through customisation, people become involved and engaged: they appropriate small pieces of the general (metropolitan) environment for themselves on a temporary or provisional basis. This is not as selfish as it sounds. Any act of appropriation in the public realm not only satisfies an immediate requirement of convenience, but also demonstrates that it can be done; revealing through a process of iteration, imitation and variation, the multiple latent potential of a given physical environment. Such a process soon weeds out appropriations deemed to be unacceptable.

Customisation is cultural, and sub-cultural. The ‘general public’ as a whole does not use space in this way. But there are some general prerequisites and characteristics which can be observed; firstly, the environment requires some give, or ‘slack’ in the system; this can be spatial or in terms of control and surveillance. Environments where form perfectly fits function, or are totally controlled, do not encourage improvisation. On the contrary, a ‘lack of fit’ or loose-fit between a given situation and what is required of it are catalysts for modification and appropriation. Over a range of studies in different physical and social contexts, we have noticed that environments where there is too-much or too-little of something, or where there is ambiguous purpose (no clear overriding determinant) are environments where customisation is more likely to occur. Secondly, this type of occupation necessarily involves temporary, moveable and lightweight items: the furniture of the city. Of course human bodies themselves are the most mobile of all urban components and the way we deploy
and place ourselves in certain situations can in itself customise and modify a physical construct. But also mobile and fixed signage, loose seating, pot plants, trees, decorations, vehicles, add-on fixtures, gardens, letterboxes, fences, temporary storage, junk... in short, much of the physical 'stuff' which proliferates in the city but is often excluded from urban and architectural thinking, and metropolitan-scale decisions. This flotsam of material is highly significant in determining the overall qualities and experience of an urban environment; sometimes more so than the buildings themselves. In the most potent examples, however, the architectural or urban enclosure or frame and the way it is customised exhibit a mutually-dependent relationship. The physical space implies and permits certain possibilities of use (without being proscriptive) and its modification through use reveals the latent possibilities (and in some cases the retrospective purpose) of the enclosure.

This 'stuff' is also a shared link (or possible breach of the divide) between private and public realms: thinking in terms of furniture, bodies and appropriations breaks down the absolute distinction between private and public/ individual and communal, and in a sense renders the distinction less relevant than what is actually occurring.

This body of research is concerned with social logic in combination with and in relation to metropolitan logic. On the one hand the city is made by strategic, metropolitan, non-experientially-based decisions, and on the other hand it is lived in and used as a series of quite discrete and small bubbles or ecosystems of events. How does the world of human experience and interaction, where one is able to be involved, and customise their environment, relate to and fit in with the metropolitan-scale decisions that determine that environment?

The project and book By-Product-Tokyo was produced in collaboration with Shane Murray, Marika Neustupny and a group of ten RMIT Architecture students in Tokyo. The primary research and documentation was carried out on site over one semester. The project studied the enormous and complex metropolis not by trying to work it out beforehand through diagrams or theories, but by observation of discrete and concrete micro-events within. The students started by going straight in, looking for small groups or 'ecosystems' of phenomena that were able to be observed, isolated, named and recorded. These fragments were sometimes quite fleeting or transient occupations, and sometimes permanent modifications to physical structures and infrastructure.

Over time, the work accumulated a pile of individual definitions of customisation (change) within the city. Even though the study was based on 'evidence', a lot of the results are still quite speculative. In seeing how people read and use their environment in an opportunistic and immediate manner, we can be certain of the results but can only assume the combination of forces which might precipitate this action. Notwithstanding the lack of hard insider knowledge, the power of the outsider, however, is to be able to see with unfamiliar eyes, to see things which become invisible through familiarity.

From analysing this work, we began to use the idea of 'appropriation' as evidence of being engaged, or of becoming involved. The micro-systems of effect and experience documented are able to be momentarily separated out, but are not independent. Each is tangled up with other systems, and fundamentally interdependent with the bigger (urban) decisions which are often outside of direct experience. These moments of possible customisation are all by-products, or unintended consequences of other decisions (decisions and actions which produce unresolved excess or lack within the environment), and are contingent on factors outside themselves for their existence. They temporarily borrow the power and opportunity of the metropolis to achieve small pieces of liveability.
Rail-river

The large hole in bustling South Shinjuku is an unavoidable side-effect of concentrated railway infrastructure, but also provides something in short supply: open space with views and sunlight. In this small but protected edge off a pedestrian circulation route, couples meet at lunchtime to sit looking out over the view, enjoying the relative tranquillity of this void as if it really were a river. The combination of a personalised, temporary occupation with permanent metropolitan infrastructure is a ‘creative’ act of appropriation, and places a momentary but nevertheless concrete lived experience in direct interface with the abstract systems and networks of the metropolis.

From By-Product-Tokyo exchange research project. Tokyo 1999.
Photos: Nigel Bertram.
drawing: Erica Diakoff
Human sieve: The relationship between signage, urban form and human interaction makes a composite entity at a busy intersection. A mass of signs along the street elevation transitions smoothly from multi-storey billboards at a high level to gradually more specific and smaller scale information on the way down to ground. At the base of this wall of signage, teams of promotional staff wearing brightly coloured advertising jackets move to target pedestrians who arrive in groups synchronised by the pedestrian crossing lights. The graphic pulsing of neon signs above is continued by the pulsing physical movements of these ‘human advertisements’ who move out to greet the steady waves of their customers on the horizontal plane of the intersection.
Protest: When something big and broad is constricted, or when a direct route is blocked, the resultant congestion creates new opportunities for exposure and physical contact. Opposite the station entrance at south Shinjuku, small advertisers and groups of political activists choose the corner which forms the narrowest point between two broad areas of public circulation to hand out pamphlets and make themselves seen and heard. The guaranteed concentration of traffic flow is further impeded by this by-product activity generating a vicious circle of congestion which is, in many ways, beneficial. Congestion generates activity generates congestion.
Social logic in combination with urban logic

In Jeparit, in the remote Wimmera region of Victoria, the Hopetoun House Hotel occupies a prime corner position on the main street. All through-traffic turns at this intersection, meaning that cars and grain trucks slow down and re-orient. The hotel itself has a recessed porch facing this corner – a negative or re-entrant corner, which provides a shaded verandah continuous with the footpath. In the mornings, the hotel is closed but each day a group of the town’s elderly men meet there and sit along a long timber bench, with walking sticks and hats, talking and observing, greeting or joking with passers-by. The line of men, sitting comfortably in the morning sun, under cover with a wall to lean against, makes a striking formation with the formality of the central urban intersection. The men on their bench within the porch make the intersection into a social-infrastructural space of local intensity, and this small combination or ecosystem defines the ‘centre’ of town.

Site research from Rainbow + Jeparit
Urban Design Plan studio,
NMBW + Urban architecture Laboratory, 2004
In Marfa, Texas, the climate during the day is such that covered shaded space is essential for any sort of sustainable outdoor activity. On a side street, a large roof structure makes a space, through firstly shade, and secondly a sense of enclosure with a low blockwork wall to one side. This space is occupied by one car and four loose chairs, arranged in a way that suggests a group of people is about to sit down, or has just left. The combination of loose/ moveable furniture with the loose/ non-specific generosity of the roof creates an ambiguous semi-public room, which can be imagined as a place for many types of activity.

Furniture and fence.
along the canal in Elwood, a slice of public easement land that has been historically considered only a drain, the back yards of most properties are secured behind tall paling fences and the occasional garage entrance. This site, with gate open and robust furniture placed and left out in the public realm, demonstrates both the potential of the canal as a pleasant recreational frontage, and simultaneously its nature as a secondary or infrastructural space. The fact that the gate and furniture combination is so provisional (and removable) makes the act of sitting in the easement on the edge of private space all the more enjoyable. The furniture and open gate were not observed being occupied, and could have been there for months or only minutes, but in its arrangement this ensemble is highly suggestive, acting as a type of sign in relation to both the raw public potential and the informal ‘back’ quality of this particular type of public space.
In the Brisbane suburb of Newfarm, an elevated timber house on a flat site is furnished with three letterboxes, three gas meters, and a comfortable-looking arrangement of chairs and table in the front yard. Closer inspection reveals three staircases, each leading to their own external entrance. The centralised plan of the typical double-fronted Queenslander house and its raised position in relation to the street and surrounding site, mean that a collection of external stairs is not uncommon even in a single household. The potential of this physical arrangement for accommodating separate entrances and subdivisions within the one house is demonstrated here, where the modifications take the form of furniture and infrastructure (letterboxes, meters). The combination of three into one forces the social outdoor space into the front yard and public realm, making a more interactive and suggestive streetscape.
Contemporary warehouses are large and lightweight free-span structures, occupied with maximum flexible space for storing goods and vehicle circulation in the centre. In this way, the space of the warehouse and its concrete apron/industrial yard is similar to a paddock in a productive landscape such as a wheat farm, where the apparent emptiness of the field conceals a type of invisible density, and all permanent buildings and structures are pushed to the edge. In this example in Laverton, the edge of the concrete wall out of the circulation zone has been appropriated and personalised by the floor manager and the various fixtures and paraphernalia required for daily tasks. The lightness of this thin layer of human occupation is prompted by the infrastructural-scale and non-accommodating space of the warehouse, and highlights the quite personal customisation that has occurred over time. On the other side of the wall, a row of chairs similarly occupies the thin apron edge out of the path of forklifts, to create and suggest the potential of this edge as a light, social space.

Photographs and drawings by Ying-Lan Dann, Contemporary Industry studio, RMIT Architecture, Nigel Bertram 2009.
DISCUSSION

In their book *In Search of New Public Domain* (2001), Maarten Hajer and Arnold Reijndorp propose a differentiation between ‘public space’ – ie space that is not private, and freely accessible to everyone – and what they term ‘public domain’, that is spaces, whether private or public in nature, in which “an exchange between different social groups is possible and also actually occurs” (p.11). A key point leading to this distinction is their questioning of the assumption that public space is (or should be) somehow neutral, equally belonging to every section of society as characterized by the dominant and romantic notion of public space as a ‘place of meeting’.

Hajer and Reijndorp argue that rather than being the cause of the so-called demise or decline of public space in our cities, ‘parochialization’ (ownership or dominant occupation by one particular group) is a way in to an understanding of how public domain functions; it is the specific groups who frequent and in fact appropriate such individual urban spaces that impart on that space its specific character – its ‘authenticity’:

“Perhaps it is not parochialization that hinders the development of public domain, but in fact an overwrought idea of the public space as a neutral meeting place for all social groups regardless of class, ethnicity or lifestyle.” (p.85)

So rather than neutral and even spaces for an idealized notion of the ‘general public’, it is perhaps spaces where specific groups of people actively become involved, appropriate or borrow urban space where we are able to then experience and take part in some sort of meaningful exchange where there is actually something (an other) to exchange with. It follows that situations which allow, provoke or encourage such appropriation might be seen as those which are more able to foster the creation of public domain experiences:

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Contents and container

These two photographs commissioned for the Australian exhibition at the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2006, depict the non-linear relationship between architectural or urban frame and the life which occurs within. A shop space in Footscray, built long before Vietnamese migration to the area, is easily reappropriated and totally transformed through culturally-specific contents (without any modification to the container). In Epping, the abstract edge between residential and industrial planning zones is rendered physically by a large precast concrete wall: which forms backdrop and boundary to a domestic backyard, with satellite dish and garden shed, and perhaps a wall to play basketball or other games against.

The paradox is that what many people experience as pleasant public space is in reality often dominated by a relatively homogenous group. However, these are not the spaces dominated by one's own group. Anyone reflecting on personal 'public-domain experiences' will notice on closer inspection that the key experiences with shared use of space often involve entering the parochial domains of 'others'. Public domain is thus not so much a place as an experience. One experiences this space as public domain because it does not belong to that specific dominant group. This paradox of the experiencing of public domain comes up again and again. John Urry (1990) remarked that tourists are put at ease by everyday things (eating, going shopping) in an exotic world. A public space is experienced as more pleasant the more the activities of the dominant group turn out to be variants on one's own everyday life, and thus foster participation rather than spectatorship. Seen in this light, public domain is an experience at a location where the 'code of behaviour' is followed by groups with which we are not familiar. This entails an interesting paradox: the dominance of a certain group does not preclude the experience of public domain, but rather produces it. 'Citizens create meaningful public space by expressing their attitudes, asserting their claims and using it for their own purposes,' writes Peter Goheen (1998, p.479)...

"Sleeping in public", "Different chairs", and others events happened by accident, or at least outside of the view of the original purpose/ authorship of the space in which they occur.

Christopher Alexander has observed, collected and documented many phenomena relating to the acts of inhabiting and occupying both public and private realms (see particularly A Pattern Language, 1977). His observations, for example "Sleeping in public", "Different chairs", or "Light on two sides of every room", are both perceptive and useful, and relate to some of the observations made in this document; however it is in his proposals for (and assumption of) synthesis that I diverge from Alexander’s point of view. A Pattern Language reduces each observation of a complex found situation to a diagram for emulation (a pattern) and his overarching position is a reformist one, looking at historical, vernacular or non-western examples in order to change ('improve') contemporary western cities.

The observations of found conditions presented in this document (in booklets Intersections and Appropriations) remain in the place and time in which they are found; as evidence of a particular and specific set of cultural, physical and economic forces, and of opportunities realised. In many cases these events happened by accident, or at least outside of the view of the original purpose/ authorship of the space in which they occur.

Hajer and Reijndorp are also very careful not to position their observations as solutions or formulae. Rather, they challenge designers to respond to these observations and analyses in future urban design work – to take into account the fact that such phenomena exist. As the authors of Pet Architecture Guidebook and others have shown, by keeping the full complexity of a found situation – ie. by not reducing it to a diagram – it remains tied to a particular place and evidence of the present (or in Steven Holl’s terms, a study of cause and effect) rather than necessarily assuming its own endurance or proposing such a situation as a model for repetition in the future. There is a big difference between a ‘guidebook’ and a ‘pattern book’, not least that the former is inseparable from its location.
Apartment entry, Tokyo

The space at the edge of private and public property is an interface condition, appropriated with furnishings in both directions which render the single boundary line more complex: the private realm leaks out of the interior to personalise its surroundings through pot plants, an awning over the door and space for a bicycle, while the metropolitan services necessary for living also use this zone for equipment such as meters, electrical connections, letterbox and signage.
6. ELWOOD HOUSE
A family of two parents and three teenage children asked us to reconfigure their house (which had already been reconfigured many times before) and utilise leftover spaces on the site to allow them to stay living in their community.

The design needed to provide mutual distance or 'breathing space' for individuals within the overall togetherness of the family-house unit on a compact site.

The site’s shape is formed by the easement of the Elwood Canal, producing a very small back yard but also a great sense of surrounding open space. The house has no immediate neighbours to the north, south or east sides. It is surrounded by the landscape of the canal, and the sports fields of local primary and secondary schools.

The design seeks to establish new relationships with this sometimes lively public realm, to address the canal as a positive frontage, and to allow mutually-beneficial overlaps between private and public activities.
Architectural expression develops from its particular situation as a corner building, highly exposed to a public thoroughfare along its side boundary. The existing sense of side/fence is maintained but also made more porous, acknowledging the current role and potential of the canal.

The structure is a braced timber frame over a core-filled blockwork base. Internal plywood lining is utilised as structural bracing. A thin steel plate tension truss over studs works together with internal lining to allow a cantilever for the car to enter diagonally below.

All of this constructional difference is masked over by a uniform surface of timber paling boards, which shift from true fence condition (with gaps) to building condition (insulated). Over time, the garden planting will grow and merge with the native landscaping of the canal, and the fence will turn the same silver grey as its neighbours.
The new volume forms a shaded undercroft space facing north-east to the canal. This can be used for carparking, or equally for outdoor workshop activities or casual recreation space.

The gravel surface of the undercroft merges with the easement roadway so that it is unclear exactly where the site boundary lies. Children can cut the corner on the way to school. Chairs can be scattered into the public realm.
The new room facing the canal is accessed from the mid-landing of the existing internal stair. This sets up a series of half-levels which turn the previous distinct separation of ‘upstairs’ and ‘downstairs’ into four more even zones of ground level, parents level, childrens level and roof terrace. Each is only a half-flight apart which makes for easier connections but also allows privacy.

The new room is approached obliquely from the stair. The large window provides canal views and light through this space to the deep existing stairwell at the centre of the house. The stair continues outside. Upstairs, the new roof terrace offers another form of public-private interaction over the fence. Domestic life appears in the public realm in unexpected ways.
The new windows and openings to the canal side reveal certain aspects of the building's construction, while they also carefully modulate and allow for customisation of view, privacy and ventilation.

Upper level windows have recessed blinds for privacy and aluminium sills which reflect light to the interior. Glazing is tucked in the space between the cladding and the structure. Each opening is designed to be complete in itself, from both sides.

Side shutters with flywire screens allow for cross-ventilation without interrupting the view.
Elwood House
NMBW Architecture Studio
2006 - 2008

Project Team
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Awards
Architecture Award
Residential Architecture, Alterations +
Additions
Australian Institute of Architects (Vic)
Awards
2008

Shortlisted
House category
World Architecture Festival, Barcelona
2009

Photography
Peter Bennetts
7. THRESHOLDS

If a building is to play an effective urban role, then it needs to be able to act as a background as well as a foreground – that is, it needs to allow the activities of people and other parts of its environment to also come into focus.

A small addition to a large field can, if orchestrated carefully, re-focus and redirect that broader field without itself becoming the primary focal point. This occurs simultaneously at three scales: the scale of the broader urban realm relevant to the project, the scale of the object or edifice itself, and the scale of specific, human-experiential interaction with that object, in the field.

The ability to influence positively and establish new relationships without becoming the (singular) subject is one method of establishing an architecture which mediates: has the ability to act as both foreground and background in a given situation. This does not mean that things have to be physically small. But to think of the consequences of an architectural action or addition in an urban sense (ie outside of the mere thing itself) requires an understanding of the nature and extent of the field in which this action takes place. To define an action is to also to define (re-define) its field of influence/ its environment.

To be able to mediate between things a degree of empathy with the conditions being mediated is required. Urban architecture tunes, adjusts and amplifies its environment (rather than ‘reforms’ or replaces it). A non-sentimental type of empathy is developed through careful consideration of others and of existing conditions – whatever the situation may be.

Mediation is significantly different to resolution (or assimilation). Mediation allows a relationship or conversation to occur between different things, but does not erase the difference between them. We can gain an enhanced understanding of the condition ‘outside’, for example, through its relationship and difference to ‘inside’; just as we can gain an enhanced understanding of our private selves in relation to and contact with others (either within a small group such as a family, or in relationship to larger society and sub-cultures). A mediative approach is inherently multiple and contingent, involving the description and exploration of thresholds rather than the erasure of differences.
Left: Somers House, describing and re-defining a threshold between farm and house.

Right: Elwood House, describing and re-defining a threshold between public and private realm/ street and canal.
Over a series of works we have been trying to make architecture which positively changes and amplifies its environment in a precise and experiential way, but is also able to deflect attention away from itself, able to act as a backdrop for the ‘art of inhabitation’. One strategy which has developed in pursuit of this is a certain camouflaging at the intermediate level of architectural form (ie, between urban form and individual experience). Each project in different ways finds rather than makes its primary arrangement and shape. Searching out and making use of given or self-evident formal configurations provides a type of ‘blankness’ or background quality, which in turn places emphasis on the way things are done rather than the things themselves – the way things are made and the way they are used. It also allows us to focus on moments of ‘strangeness’ or shift from a typical condition without that strangeness becoming the primary identity or role of the project. One could argue that by keeping strangeness out of focus, or by allowing it to stay in the background rather than become an image, it resists assimilation and maintains its ability to act on an experiential level; to surprise, to confront and provoke new individual actions and understandings.

Different ways of finding and camouflaging the middle-scale of architectural form include: mimicry and borrowing of adjacent objects (Somers house/ freestanding shed), simple extension of a found condition (North Fitzroy house/ terrace lean-to), maintaining and developing an existing typological state (Elwood house/ exposed side boundary fence), utilising a repeated, traditional or obvious typological arrangement (Fitzroy apartments/ terraced street-building), removing elements to reveal a basic or fundamental condition (Building 45/ corner factory with roller door), and re-framing or re-contextualising existing objects (Pioneer Museum Plaza/ homestead into gatehouse)

But the aim of doing this is not to make the architecture ‘disappear’ or become mute. On the contrary, it is to shift attention towards moments of intensity that operate at the scale of the individual and the city (and intensify the direct relationship between these two conditions). In each case, locating specific points where the latent potential of the urban/environmental becomes understood and changed through direct contact and experience is a primary aim. Having established a self-evident case for the project’s primary arrangement, specific apertures in and departures from the background condition created gain a heightened significance. In many cases, these locations form a vestibule-like condition between different states. A vestibule is not a thing as such, but a space or a pause between two others: an opening.

In the category of ‘vestibule’ can be included; porch, verandah, undercroft, arcade, passage, lobby, alcove. Such spaces are frequently ambiguous and overlapped with other functions such as circulation. Starting from a type of bodily spatial intuition, we have through repetition and observation increasingly focussed on such small, non-core, mediating elements. These are spaces – apertures, hollows, recesses, gaps - which partially enclose but also place bodies in direct engagement with their surroundings. There is an inherent tension between protection and exposure; an unresolved state of high potential energy.

Architecturally, vestibules are rarely listed as a core operational requirement. By definition they are non-core, transitional. In terms of a discussion about background and foreground, the vestibule operates precisely in the middle-ground – in the shadow between one condition and another. In terms of observation, the vestibule’s middle-ness enables perception in two directions at once: from without and from within. In some cases (eg Elwood house, Somers house, Building 45) these spaces have been stained black to reinforce their reading as shadows or recesses (non-forms) from outside, and to intensify the experience of relationship to outside from inside (to focus on what is not itself). The black surface provides an edge or frame through which perception is heightened.
Each of the following examples affects a pause, and some tension, at the moment of threshold (this threshold having first been established through the overall arrangement or formal strategy of the project.) The physical experience at the threshold extends and focuses on the brief moment between inside and out, the space between private and public, the difference between small and large. At the threshold, we construct a bodily relationship with the building and its environment, and hence define one way in which this ensemble becomes urban; that is, provokes and re-establishes relationships between individual, group and world.

Side street verandah room, Jeparit 2004
Mimicking

The new addition at Somers borrows its colour, materiality and overall volumetric response from other buildings on the site. As such, the new building has a certain background invisibility, despite its size. It is hard to tell from a distance which parts are new and which are old.

At the scale of direct experience, the closed thin form of the shed reveals openings which act as non-specific interstitial spaces or occupiable thresholds, between interior and exterior, and between house (domestic) and farm (agricultural/landscape) conditions.

View from Coolart Homestead, showing house addition and other outbuildings

Somers House
2002-2004
Extending

The rebuilt rear section of the single-storey house in North Fitzroy extends by literally continuing a roof found in the existing building. The result is of a completely different scale, materiality and effect than either what was there before or the surrounding buildings, but its basic construct and method belongs to the logic of the existing terrace house pair.

At the moment of threshold between inside and outside, a pause of space is made: 850mm of gap which makes an active division between living space and garden space, describing and articulating through use the combination and difference of two simple conditions.
Adopting

The large apartment building in Fitzroy adopts a self-evident and obvious formal configuration to determine the massing on the street. The three-storey party-wall terrace structure, built hard to the boundary with side walls exposed, is a completely ordinary form found throughout the suburb on similar sites.

At a closer level however, where bodies are directly in front of or within the building, this overall blankness of form reveals a surprising depth and transparency, where the arcade void makes a threshold space that extends the full depth of the site, understandable and able to be experienced from both inside and out.

Three-storey street block with engaged outbuildings (including new opening by architect Kerstin Thompson), Fitzroy 2003

Fitzroy Apartments
2003-2010
Removing

The project at RMIT Building 45 started with an existing building, and clarified its robust urban presence by removing internal additions, repairing and restoring surfaces and existing windows, and re-opening closed apertures.

Rather than add anything to the exterior of this found condition to draw attention to the new occupation, the existing roller door entrance bay was re-opened and restored as the main entrance, making an impromptu shopfront display space that casually accommodates a range of semi-public functions. The depth of this protected recess emphasises the relationship of the interior activity to the street, and encourages lingering at the edge.

Existing entrances, re-glazed and re-used

RMIT Building 45
2007-2008
Re-framing

The Pioneer Museum in Jeparit already had a generous public entrance building, but it was disguised as an exhibit, and located behind a tall chainlink fence topped with barbed-wire. Nevertheless, the verandah was well-furnished and used by local volunteers to greet visitors and watch the world go by.

The making of a new public entrance and forecourt started by identifying this latent potential. The fence was re-built to butt into the sides of the existing building, turning the whole building from an island exhibit to a boundary threshold. Existing furniture on the verandah was bolted down, extra steps and a ramp added, and the same social activity now takes place, only this time in the public realm and open all hours.

Previous verandah with chainlink fence and new verandah condition.

New building opening April 2007

Pioneer Museum Plaza
2005-2007
Occupying

The large existing windows facing west over Swanston Street provide welcome light and aspect to the deep interior of the previous department store space at the Lyons office, but too much glare for comfortable all-day working at a computer.

The potential of this abrupt, public-scaled boundary between interior and city was magnified through a particular type of occupation - furnished as a space for personal drawing and quiet discussion. The boundary wall becomes a space: a location where an individual or small group can withdraw to every now and then, but with a heightened awareness of their relationship to both the larger office body and the city beyond.

Department store windows, as found and with new window tables attached

Lyons Office
2008-2009
DISCUSSION

Hiroshi Nakao writes of the complicated relationship between interior and exterior space:

“... Still, not to be at home in one's home is part of morality (Theodor W. Adorno). If this morality be worthy of our recognition, then architecture must now immediately abandon its mythical function of protecting the interior from the exterior and seek rather, through its original function as an edge, to protect the exterior from the interior. Instead of hastily repairing the unexpected hole found in the heart of the interior, it must give the hole firm edges so that it will not be filled. Since providing edges or contour is a means of producing a dimension of depth, architecture by adhering to this trait of character, can make an abrupt dent in, or open a hollow in, our uniformly interiorized, glue-like environment. Architecture will make spaces like puddles in the dips of a paved road, not only altering our monotonous walking rhythm, but also moving us to get our feet wet, cheerfully, in a child-like way...”

- Hiroshi Nakao, “Not to Be at Home”, 1998

Nakao is a friend with whom we have had many discussions and also worked together (for the exhibition The Sphere of Architecture/ The Architecture of Spheres, Tokyo 2003). In 2001 I wrote a short piece on his work, published in the Craft Victoria Bulletin, which in retrospect holds some relevance to the work under discussion in this chapter. Although Nakao’s works are much more intensely singular, the way in which we have studied the abrupt power of apertures and holes between and through different spatial conditions and territories, and the way we have sought to locate moments of pause and tension at the edges or threshold conditions of buildings, between private and public/individual and group conditions, relates partially to this thinking about relationships between bodies, architectural enclosures and their environments:

Surface and Depth (Nigel Bertram, 2001)

Hiroshi Nakao talks of two types of ‘reduction’: one which simply reduces, by making less (the usual route of contemporary minimalism), and one which actively compresses, by making tighter and more dense. It is the latter course which he pursues.

“A house is an outside injected into the world, turned indoors and closed.”*

The buildings have been described as ‘tactile’ due to the dark recesses of interiors and lack of visual highlight in monochrome surfaces, but this haptic quality also occurs because these works place the body (you) under pressure. Nakao and Serizawa’s interiors are not to look at objectively. Their construction and material surfaces do not ‘express’ or represent, but neither are they abstract. They are malleable. Cor-ten sheet with lapped joints. The exterior is similarly clad in malleable cor-ten sheet with lapped joints. A thin, hard lining to a thin, hard container that nonetheless is incredibly sensual, invoking bodily reaction and the desire to touch. Such a tactile response is due to both size or intimacy in relation to the human body, and the fact that material or matter in this case is rendered active. It presses in on you as you are pushed out towards it. There

Nakao and Serizawa’s buildings often expand vertically or horizontally in the middle. The basilica section of the house in Tokorozawa is centralized like a medieval church but the inward pressure of the tight container means that it is hard to occupy this space in a subdued way. Small spaces of specific use (kitchen, bathroom, bedrooms, stair) have been squeezed to the edge, leaving a center that is focused inwards, but hollow. On the ground floor, a glass dining table is fixed in place and bodies surround its transparency.

The center of the Black Maria / New York Penthouse project (1) squashes into a line, or expands into a gaping hole. Inhabitation is arranged in a series of thin, corridor-like spaces around the periphery that change in width, sometimes opening up to sudden contact with the outside. These spaces are just large enough for a human body (seated, standing, sleeping). While living in this house you are kept in constant, physical contact with its edge.

The material quality of the edges making these enclosures is thin and hard, like a shell. Wall, floor and ceiling are the same. Surfaces do not ‘express’ or represent, but neither are they abstract. They are immediate. Their construction and material substance remains in the present, without being either turned into an object of desire (tectonic/material fetish) or forced to transform into something else (atectonic illusionism). In the Tokorozawa house (2) sheets of thin plywood are fixed bluntly onto their frame with joints and fixings neither particularly concealed, nor expressed. The exterior is similarly clad in malleable cor-ten sheet with lapped joints. A thin, hard lining to a thin, hard container that nonetheless is incredibly sensual, invoking bodily reaction and the desire to touch. Such a tactile response is due to both size or intimacy in relation to the human body, and the fact that material or matter in this case is rendered active. It presses in on you as you are pushed out towards it. There
is no distance (idealised, objective) between your own physicality and that of the house.

“This house is a bird cage.”

It is perhaps a rawness (of space, of substance, of bodies) that distinguishes this work from other contemporary architects working precisely with traditional techniques and sensual materials, whose execution is impeccable and ‘worked’ to the point that their craft occupies all space and all surfaces – enveloping and eventually suffocating its inhabitants. In Nakao and Serizawa’s interiors, by contrast, one still requires an instinct for survival.

(From *Craft Victoria Bulletin*, Sept. 2001. All quotations from Hiroshi Nakao)

Bird hides are a peculiar form of non-architecture. In a bird hide, you are completely separated from the surrounding environment, paradoxically in order to allow a more intense relationship with it (and with birds). A bird hide encloses human bodies tightly, and absorbs their movement, so that they cannot be sensed from outside – although in many cases the structure is far from invisible! This interior space is interstitial, a darkened threshold between body and environment, from which we understand the outside world in a detached but intimate way. This picture was taken in a bird hide at the Coolart wetlands, adjacent to the Somers House property and was used as a reference point for that project.

*Coolart bird hide interior
Lucinda McLean, 2001*
8. FITZROY APARTMENTS
This part of Fitzroy is a mixture of small-scale terrace housing and larger light industrial buildings which have been used by car-mechanics, panel-beaters, spray painters and the like.

Our client was a metalworker who previously manufactured mufflers in a factory on this site. His brief was for seven apartments, with double-garages for each, making the most of good views to the city skyline. He pointed out to us that the 18 metre width of the site perfectly matches a standard carparking layout.

Considering the various possibilities for providing access, light and air to seven dwellings, we arrived at an arrangement which divided the seven units into two buildings: one containing three apartments facing the street, the other containing four apartments facing the lane. A courtyard between them provides light, air, privacy and views in many directions.

Looking at local and historical building patterns for this size and type of site, this way of building matches the typical surrounding configuration of street buildings, which span boundary-to-boundary, and then various rear yard or laneway buildings, which are often more shed-like, irregular and three-dimensional in nature.
The two buildings are joined together by a ground floor arcade-lobby. Cars enter and exit from the lane, and pedestrians can enter from either end.

The council requires two carspaces for apartments of this size, but you certainly don’t need them living in Fitzroy. The glazed doors allow garages to potentially be used for other things: they could become workshops, play spaces or even small shops or studios. We started researching arcades in the city.

We also didn’t just want to ‘suppress’ the idea of the garage, which is often the case in residential developments of this type. We wanted to include the idea that the carpark is important, because if you travel by car you would enter into the building through that space every day.
Entering all the apartments through the arcade means that it is hard to tell whether an entrance belongs to a dwelling in the front building or the back building. All entrances are the same, confusing the hierarchy between the two parts and unifying the complex into a single entity.

Cars and people are not separated; they share the same space. Cars drive slowly over unusual surfaces. Like the mid-block shopping arcades, or laneways, where through-circulation is shared intimately with display and access to shops/dwellings above.

The arcade is an ambiguous space, open and transparent but also private; semi-external, but also an interior. It gives something back to the street and gives a type of semi-public scale to the building.
The space between the two buildings is not ‘common area’ but is subdivided into small private yards which are accessible from first-floor bedrooms. Above this occupied level, the shape of the open space allows sideways views across rooftops of adjacent buildings, and allows the rear apartments to share northerly light and the feeling of the large deciduous street trees.

Each apartment has a different combination of open spaces. Elevated terraces face north and also south to the city, allowing for cross-ventilation and views through. The configuration of the rear building allows the front apartments to look towards the city beyond without directly affecting the dwellings behind.
Various metalwork surfaces and parts have been engineered together with the client to achieve a certain lightness and efficiency. All ornament is also structural, with pressings, folds and pleats allowing the metal to achieve a tight and delicate quality.

The repetitive street facade is detailed so as to disguise internal divisions and emphasise the building as an urban block. Street and laneway frontages are cut flat and subdued in colour. Internal surfaces and side walls, however, are bright and ornamental, reflecting light into the courtyards and exposing the insides of the building to the street.
Fitzroy Apartments
NMBW Architecture Studio
2003 - 2010

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review: Simon Anderson

Photography
Peter Bennetts
9. PLANS

Flattening hierarchies and functional separations makes for more possibilities of different re-combinations and re-groupings. Spaces without specific functions (or with ambiguous purpose) promote sharing and borrowing, and hence interaction.

The plan is the primary architectural device for organising space. Through the plan, human activities are separated and connected. Not only functional but also social relationships are established - or not established - by the actions of planning. Of course sectional and three-dimensional adjacencies complicate this simplification; however the plan remains in everyday terms the primary tool for this research, as the buildings in question (and their city in general) are more horizontal than vertical in organisation.

All the projects in this research take their stated brief and break it apart in some way, in order to re-combine it in another way. The aim of doing that is to allow preconceptions about human relationships and physical relationships that might have occurred in the brief to be unpacked and re-said. Often the spaces end up being more (in number) than was asked for, or in a different order, or in a different configuration.

Our aim is to increase possibilities for different interpretations and uses, and provide more possibilities for re-combinations and re-grouping of spaces by different people over time. It follows that plans which provide the most difference, highest levels of adjacency and least specificity are most useful. A compact plan of many rooms, for example, has more possibilities for cross-relationships than does a linear or strung out spatial arrangement of singular rooms; as each space is directly adjacent to more other spaces. A house with many external doors offers multiple ways of entering and leaving and hence different understandings of where the ‘front’ and ‘back’ might be. Ambiguous, non-proscriptive spaces are more flexible than specific single use spaces, as yet-unimagined activities can more easily be accommodated.

This direction of thinking, towards a combination of social flexibility, use-complexity and non-determined hierarchy, leads away from the figurative or expressive (gestural) plan and towards the compact but varied plan. Focusing on the arrangement and relationships between spaces, rather than becoming preoccupied with the qualities of the space itself, takes the emphasis away from the architect as designer of (fixed) formal complexity, and places emphasis on the user by allowing for (variable) use-based complexity.
The plan establishes the logic of a building. This logic is tied to a reasonably fixed set of structural and economic factors, as well as issues such as social decorum and cultural expectations; however it is also strongly connected to predetermined categories of use. For example, circulation space in educational buildings is frequently classified and treated as separate to useable space. However if a corridor is thought of as simply a room giving access to other rooms, then other possibilities for its use, shape and role in a facility open up. In a contemporary house the bathroom is one of the most functionally specific (and expensive) rooms; a completely separate environment sealed from other spaces through a range of regulatory, practical and material expectations. If we reconsider a bathroom as simply a room with a bath in it that has the possibility for privacy, then it becomes more possible to include the bathroom within the same thinking that we apply to the rest of the building.

The following plans aim to achieve the richest interaction of activity within the most logical, efficient and non-deterministic package. Mathematical and social relationships are considered together. Each plan – essentially a composition of rooms - contains what might be called logical ‘switches’, where the hierarchy of arrangement is shifted or provides opportunity for multiple understandings over time or by different people and activities. Sometimes this is as simple as a door being open or closed, sometimes it is allowing different relationships to occur between the same spaces depending upon the way those spaces are entered or framed in relation to others, sometimes it is shifting and recombining our understanding of what is connected to what.

Plan for a slab hut, Queensland, late nineteenth century
Somers House

An indoor room and an outdoor room, a wardrobe and a bathroom, an entry space and a vestibule, each in relationship to a repetitive but asymmetrical series of structural bays. There is a clear geometric relationship in pairs between these parts, which overlaps with their use category and experiential sequence. It is not immediately clear what each room is for, but each space is connected to at least two others (including external space). The sectional form of the whole complicates the hierarchies of the plan, with the resultant three-dimensional volume altering the effective size, impression and connectedness of each space.
Moonee Ponds house

A house with no master bedroom for a family to grow up in. A series of relationships are established between the existing building and the new addition, each half being approximately the same size, and each containing two bedrooms, one living room and one bathroom. The kitchen ties the house together and provides direct access to outside. The brief contained a ‘parent’s bedroom’ and rooms for a series of children, but we thought that if you just made four bedrooms all the same and were able to occupy them at different times as the family grows up and the teenagers want independence, and so on, then that would be a more flexible situation. The plan enables the social relationships of the family to change and find their own place over time.

Fitzroy Apartments (overleaf)

Seven dwellings arranged into two urban volumes; a terrace-type street building and a more three-dimensional laneway building. The street building follows a conventional party-wall terrace layout but with broad, warehouse-scale living spaces. The laneway building is divided into narrower terrace-scale strips angled towards city views and configured to allow views, light and air to all apartments. The ground floor is divided differently, organised by the logic of car and pedestrian access through a shared central arcade. Each apartment’s entry faces the arcade in the same way, reducing the distinction and hierarchy between front and back buildings and unifying the complex into a single whole.
The existing single-storey corner building is made up of two separate structures; one concrete-framed towards the street housing studios for the school of Architecture and Design, and one steel-framed truss roof towards the rear housing TAFE diploma of building studies workshop. These two halves function independently, but also work as a whole, sharing amenities, entrance and external basketball court. The subdivision of the studios in the front half of the building works with the metre of existing concrete structural bays, with each small studio two bays wide (out of phase with columns at three-bay intervals). The depth of the studio alcoves is the same as the depth of the corridor/open space which serves them, making an equal relationship to each side of the new sliding doors and questioning the hierarchy of which is primary and secondary space.
Lyons office

A field of desks, benches and small enclosures is arranged within a 1200m² open space. The existing columns, exposed concrete beams and large windows set up the metre of the space, to which all new insertions respond and gain presence from. A series of studied relationships is established; between existing structure and new insertions, windows and tables, open-plan desks and enclosed offices, small rooms and large rooms, walls and columns, public foyer areas and work areas, work areas and communal staff areas, but a sense of the whole as a single open space is always retained. On entering from the lifts the full depth of the space is apparent, reinforcing the sense of the whole group, even though functional subdivisions and sub-groupings exist.

RMIT Building 88 (overleaf)

A 37x50 metre commercial floorplate with central core is re-occupied as studio teaching and project space. A series of new enclosures of different sizes and orientations are made within this open plan, in a way that avoids a clear circulation path or hierarchy between them. Teaching occurs in both enclosed and ‘open’ spaces; and the narrow and wide spaces left between enclosures can be freely occupied by small or large groups for programmed or un-programmed activities. Spaces for teaching, meetings, staff accommodation and research are all treated in the same way, making it possible for any one activity to expand or contract through management and timetabling. In place of the usual hierarchy of functional category, the floor is re-organised in terms only of the size of the group requiring space.
RMIT Building 88,
Existing condition and schematic
design plans 2009
Sorrento house

A house of 150m² on a steeply sloping site establishes an elevated platform with parking and storage under and attic roof space above. The main level is arranged in the manner of a traditional four-room ‘core’, surrounded by peripheral enclosed, semi-enclosed and external verandah-type spaces. The core rooms and peripheral rooms establish a series of sequential relationships to each other, with each room connecting to at least two others. There are many possible routes through the house, with circulation space treated in the same manner as primary rooms. In total there are 18 different rooms (spaces) in this small house, each with its own unique shape, size and character. A large hip roof follows the slope of the site and overlays a different hierarchy of vertical space to the logic of the plan.
Kazuyo Sejima does not discuss her approach to organizing space in terms of function, form or image, but in terms of human activity – the social relationships which the plan and its arrangements and subdivisions makes possible. This role of the spatial organization of buildings may seem self-evident, however reading Sejima’s texts in Tokyo gave me a different understanding of Sejima and Nishizawa’s work – one not based on the way it appeared but on the way it works. The way in which social relationships and hierarchies are understood – and changed – in projects such as the Kitagata Apartments (1) and S-House (2) can be thought of in terms of the relationship between closeness and distance, and the manner in which these qualities are varied through thinking relatively (in terms of relationships) rather than in absolute terms. The Kitagata apartments have a striking image which has been much copied, but what is easily overlooked is that the way in which individuals, household groups and the overall whole relate to each other has been subtly but completely shifted. This happens in the way in which the individual rooms are entered and exited, through both inner and outer corridor spaces, and through the inclusion of external doors to each individual room:

“The Gifu Kitagata Apartment is a public housing complex. Conventionally, the construction of public housing has been determined as a process of simply gathering the required number of flats based on a certain given idea of what a family is. But I thought that collective housing today is not just for families, but a place where people live in all kinds of collective ways. In other words, the base unit is not an apartment but a single room. The building resulting from this is not an opaque solid, but a light mass of layered rooms. From the street, the grouping into apartments is indicated, although variation in the patterns of each collection of rooms allows for differences in living patterns. From the access side, each individual room opens directly into a shared corridor, so it is not possible to be sure of the extent of any particular apartment, or of which amount of space belongs to who. A certain anonymity is born, making a distance which is further than physical distance.”


Similarly, the S-House is a single building containing two families (parents and grandparents), totalling six people. Each room on the ground floor is connected but also separated by a perimeter semi-external corridor, which in Sejima and Nishizawa’s words becomes a “buffer zone between family generations as well as between inside and outside”. The compact plan in which everyone is physically close achieves a great effective distance and privacy for each individual through the device of the perimeter corridor. Upstairs, this separation is brought back together in a single, large communal living space.

Thinking about buildings with many rooms and many doors for multiple constituencies led to a number of new studies of other buildings closer to hand, and was influential in the thinking framework for Division and Multiplication. We have investigated Victorian mansions such as Como House in Melbourne, for example, not for its architectural style or features but for the way its plan works, separating and connecting different spaces and allowing servants to enter and leave while the formal life of the family also remains intact. The many doors (both internal and external) and
linking/ vestibule spaces of Victorian plans are intimately connected with the complex social structures and relationships of the time. The typical Australian hotel is another example of a house with many doors. This is particularly evident in the country, where often the one establishment has to provide for the entire community. The structure of spaces within a hotel allows families and the elderly to enter in one door (the lounge, and sometimes additional dining room), the rough and rowdy to enter through another door (the public bar) and visiting guests or residents in another (leading to the upstairs rooms). These worlds are kept completely separate from each other although directly adjacent, and are linked by the service bar (sometimes with its own external door), which for reasons of efficiency serves to all spaces at once, nullifying the social distinctions, and across which some 'leakage' of sound and view inevitably occurs, reinforcing the sense of the whole. These investigations have been instrumental to thinking about planning and arrangement of space in our works, and have led us to a new way of understanding the ordinary historical fabric of our city, without regard to appearance or to the historical period from which it comes.

While designing the Fitzroy Apartment building, we were studying the plans of Jose Antonio Coderch’s work in Barcelona; thinking about the ways in which entrances are arranged, about the interaction between shared, semi-public spaces such as lobbies and stairwells and their relationship to the street and to individual apartments. The building in Barceloneta (la Barceloneta 1952-55) arranges in its plan a sharing of light and aspect, with compact ingenuity achieved through the use of oblique/diagonal relationships. For example, the central stair borrows light from kitchen terraces facing the street, and the three bedrooms of each apartment share access to and light from two semi-external terraces (3, 4).

The adjustable louvers which uniformly cover the windowed and terraced areas of façade create a series of beautiful and liveable semi-external rooms, allowing the apartments to breathe, whilst also balancing the needs of each apartment with the urban role of the building as a whole; and rendering ambiguous the difference between indoor and outdoor spaces and which space belongs to whom.

A related body of work that we were not aware of at the time of designing was recently pointed out by Simon Anderson in his review of the project for Architecture Australia (July/August 2010). The Perth architect Brian Klopp designed a series of large re-developments of ex-industrial sites in Fremantle in the 1980s, in which pedestrian access and car access share the same space, and privacy for each dwelling is combined with a sense of community for the block as a whole. Apartments look out into central landscaped spaces, and the walls and dividers of patio gardens are arranged so that when sitting down it is private, but when standing up connection to and awareness of neighbours is possible (see especially Fabrik – 3-5 Ellen St, Fremantle).

This type of soft-ambiguity and everyday flexibility: between individual and group, between group and whole/ city and between different conditions and spaces within the building is something we have been aiming for in our work. I believe that this type of approach to organising space increases the richness and diversity of its potential occupation.
10a. SOMERS HOUSE
This project involved the refurbishment of an existing house, a new verandah link and a new building (a ‘parents wing’) on a 50 acre property in Somers, a coastal area on Westernport Bay, approximately 70km from Melbourne.

The project is one of many in the ongoing management of the property by the clients, including infrastructural and environmental initiatives, water storage, tree plantings, the farming of sheep, etc.

The site is quite exposed, with strong coastal winds. It is next to Coolart Homestead and is accessed from the original homestead driveway. Coolart is a historic farming property and coastal reserve with walking tracks and internationally significant wetlands.

Our approach has been to treat the site as part of the Coolart Homestead and coastal environment and the new elements are additions to this large-scale landscape. The new building takes its form, contents, technology and materials from different parts of the site. It is not immediately apparent which parts are new and which are old.

Rather than enlarging the house and making it more dominant, a deliberate ‘anonymity’ in the new form maintains a type of evenness between all the parts: sheds, house, dams, trees...
A new verandah is added to the existing house and with the new building make a courtyard space on the south side of the house. The verandah is a reworking of the entry sequence opening the house towards the property and also links the separate building to the house. The thin galvanized steel angle columns of the structure are utilitarian steel sections similar to the structure of the tank stand.

Entering the new building from the verandah, a series of external spaces are contained within the volume and change orientation as you move through them. Having the outside spaces on the inside allows them to act as environmental and privacy buffer-zones. Doors and openable windows to the inside are accessed from these protected spaces.
The building can be opened and closed, depending on its occupation and the weather.

It is not clear to an observer what happens inside - or what is inside and what is outside - and this anonymous quality is something in common with other rural structures nearby.

The building sits quite crudely on the ground. It doesn’t actually touch, but it certainly doesn’t ‘float’. There is an avoidance of dealing with unnecessary dressing (of the base), thinking about the economy and rawness of industrial buildings… removing rather than adding.
The structure is a repetitive timber frame of trusses and purlins, which has the evenness of a utilitarian structure. There are no lintels for large openings. Structural members remain continuous in each bay. The structure includes dressed posts connected by steel plates, with tension rod bottom chords to each truss.

Interiors are lined in plywood, which conceals some structural elements and reveals others. The process of covering and revealing the frame makes the enclosure, and the regular columns appear at moments through the openings.

The building is divided into discrete rooms in both plan and section. Some tall and some low. This allows the single volume to be occupied as a living space. The rooms are arranged in pairs. A radiating geometry adjusts the focus of each room. This results in the orientation of the black outdoor room being directed towards the dam.
Cladding is laid over the frame and different openings made for the spaces. The cladding is put together with a careful use of conventional methods and the windows are treated as part of the sheet metal cladding surface. Details were studied from other rural and industrial buildings.

The internal surface is uniformly plywood, finished in oil/white stain/black stain. The external surface is 'armour grey' colorbond sheet, which approximates the colour of the aged galvanized cladding of the nearby shed. This colour is neutral like an undercoat, emphasizing the more high-contrast interior surfaces and changing tone with the sky.
Somers House
NMBW Architecture Studio
2002 - 2004

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Architecture Australia
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pp.72-77
review: Mauro Baracco + Louise Wright

Stadt Bauwelt
Special Issue on Melbourne
No.168, December 2005
Cover image

The Age
Wednesday June 16, 2004, p.6
(Domain section)
review: Anne Pilmer

Awards
Best Building Conversion Award
South East Development, Architectural Excellence in the South-East Awards, 2005

Photography
NMBW
10b. NORTH FITZROY HOUSE
The project presented to us by the clients was a small modification to a single-storey terrace house – to ‘open it up’ to the garden and ‘provide more room’. The sort of almost archetypal renovation job that is not spectacular, not particularly visible, low-budget, time consuming…

However this type of small modification is the reality of a lot of domestic construction being done in Melbourne, so it seems important for architects to engage with it. We wanted to investigate and understand something about this culturally-specific condition.

In a job like this, rather than inventing new forms, we ask what else can be achieved through the existing repertoire of forms, and what spaces can be found within existing building and site parts (ie. unused spaces, gaps and so on).

Our approach to ‘extension’ was to find existing parts of the building and literally continue them. We felt a responsibility to work more inventively with what already exists, keeping as much as possible of the old building and making solutions that carefully suited the site conditions and contemporary needs.
The new plan doesn’t enlarge the existing building - it rearranges the rooms into a new configuration; using side setbacks, odd spaces where party walls step in and out, and making a single room that feels big (even though quite small), with a direct relationship to the garden.

Ways of working include making use of the gap where something is removed - the old chimney space becomes an opportunity for a new skylight - and finding new spaces and ways of inhabiting existing built volume: for example, an attic space in the unusually large front roof.

But these moves have other implications, such as the need for a stair, which then impacts on the other existing rooms, and involves them in a new dialogue.
Starting from the street front, which remains unchanged:

- a new opening for the stair adds to the existing series of door openings along the terrace corridor;
- the stair leading up to the attic is a complete space in itself, unaware of its volume inhabited underneath (for example) as a bed space;
- the corridor leads to the new open room, with as-found wall alignments making spaces for shelving;
- and the kitchen proper is packaged into the minimum possible space to allow the workbench to be used for other things when not cooking.

By working carefully with the actual dimensions required for activities, the room feels large and somehow comfortable even though everything is quite tight.
In considering how a large single space can be made, a standard contemporary construction system of gang-nail trusses easily spans the width of the site, and allows for cantilevers where existing walls run out.

The new room exists below this large roof.

The trusses were supplied as a ‘design and construct’ package, their final form designed by the manufacturer (different to our original suggestion) as the most efficient and economic solution.
The structure and its lining are considered, and consequently affect the image of the building. The last bay is given extra attention to detail, as the threshold between inside and out, providing a covered porch and an interstitial workbench space with skylight above.

Decisions about what to clad and what to reveal allow for a surprising scale, using the full depth of the structure. The selection and placement of internal and external linings, while very simple, are worked out in detail and the final appearance reveals all of its parts to some degree.

In this type of project, the location of invention is in the lived experience and in the process of making. The architectural image is a consequence of the development of the making, and its subsequent occupation.
North Fitzroy House
NMBW Architecture Studio
2004 - 2005

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review: Stephen Crafti

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Wednesday October 26, 2005, p.23
(Domain section)
review: Jenny Brown
Saturday November 11, 2006, pp.4-5
(Domain section)
review: Melinda Houston

Architect Victoria
Awards 2005 issue, p.29

Awards
Architecture Award
Residential Architecture, Alterations + Additions
Australian Institute of Architects (Vic) Awards, 2005

Photography
NMBW
11. DETAILS

How a building appears is the result of a series of choices between revealing and concealing.

Detailing is the way in which buildings are put together. Or more precisely, the way in which each piece of the building is put together in relation to other pieces.

Detail-thought is located at moments of discontinuity in a structure or assembly – at junctions, joints or corners. Detail-thinking is a type of thinking which is not hermetic or pure, but always about one or more things in relation to each other. Details bring separate materials and (primary) building pieces together into a dependent (secondary) composition or sub-whole - such as the element ‘window sill’.

The way a building is put together determines the way it appears. In the process of resolving functional problems such as keeping water out or providing adequate fixing, certain decisions are made as to what might be exposed, expressed, concealed, or protected. The way a window opening is detailed, for example, can make the same wall appear deep or shallow, substantial or flimsy, load-bearing or suspended. In each case the same functional requirements are solved and the same materials are used, but in a different order. This ability of the detail to make solid load-bearing masonry appear sheer and skin-like or to make fibre-cement sheet cladding appear solid and load-bearing is employed by architects to support and achieve certain conceptual, aesthetic or ideological end results.

Detailing is inseparable from structure. Not so much primary structure such as beams and columns but more the structure and performance of materials and sub-elements such as fixing angles, lintels, sheet spanning ability, stiffness and bracing requirements. In order for a detail to work it must understand and address these structural and material qualities. But still the questions of expression (decisions about what and how to reveal or conceal) remain. Many contemporary buildings, for example, choose to express a ‘frame’ of even dimension around large openings, or even entire building elements in order to support a certain compositional aim. A frame of this type solves the junction detail issues and works with the properties of the materials used. However choosing to express a frame of even width involves an amount of work in concealing the performance and actual size/thickness differences
between top, sides and base of any penetration or structural unit.

It is important to acknowledge that every detail does this to a certain degree. However in certain junctions or assemblies the way in which this revealing and concealing has been done, and the reasons for it are more apparent than others. The way a building junction is assembled, if done logically and judiciously, can describe both the nature of the problem being solved and the qualities of the materials and elements which form the solution. We have observed that it is often in situations of very tight economy or pragmatic necessity where this occurs: where the nature of the question is evident in the answer provided.

By studying examples where cost and efficiency have driven the solution, rather than aesthetic goals or beliefs, the nature of material structure and performance can be more finely learnt. There is a raw expediency in such examples as agricultural or industrial details, where nothing superfluous is included; in fact elements of conventional details are left out if at all possible, to reduce constructional complexity and cost. This leaving-out of superfluous elements, together with a straightforward and direct approach to the problem at hand, underlines the clarity and self-evidently didactic nature of these ‘primitive’ solutions.

The question of detailing is also related to the question of size. Many everyday decisions an architect has to make are decisions of dimension; how thick a tabletop is, how wide or tall an opening, how deep a fascia, how low a ceiling, what diameter a column… These decisions are usually arrived at by balancing the operational requirement with the overall impression or aesthetic effect desired, or by considering notions such as proportion or a module or datum across the building as a whole. In a purely pragmatic environment, by contrast, the answer will always be “as little as possible”, combined with “whatever is easiest”. These two parameters are often at odds with each other, as the relative value of materials versus labour changes over time, as does the notion of what is standard practice. (For example, web-truss beams common in the 1950s are a highly efficient use of steel, but are rarely used today due to the high labour content in comparison to hot-rolled sections. The ongoing cost of maintenance is also a factor due to their comparatively large surface area)
Starting at the point of as little as possible, however, guarantees at least that each element is working hard. This starting objective then needs to be balanced against the limits of the construction methods and technology available. For example, a timber stud wall can be engineered to be as thin as possible in order to stand up, but certain allowances and tolerances are required to allow for other standard practices, such as the fairly indiscriminate drilling of studs by plumbers and electricians for services conduits which come in standard sizes.

Each of the following projects investigates a method of construction detailing and selection of elements which starts from the logic of "as little as possible", and then works through a series of required decisions to arrive at an end result which, as in all buildings, is inevitably a synthesis or balancing of different competing requirements. Our aim in each study has been to develop a language and a way of working that comes only from the necessary decisions we had to make. Each composition attempts to find its own logic and efficiency, balancing the operational and aesthetic requirements of the whole, and self-evidently describing the nature of the decisions made and actions undertaken (such as the act of laying cladding over a frame). This series of detailing experiments are all non-standard, but recombine standard elements and traditional techniques: they do not require 'special' fabricated components. Our requirement was that the overall urban/architectural aim of the project be achieved with each element working as hard as possible and also remaining exactly what it is and appears to be. This is what generates the qualitative expression of the architecture.
Somers House
Act of cladding over frame/ thin skin. Inner and outer skin apparent, with structure appearing between. Repetitive structural bay and purlin/ horizontal girt system derives from industrial structure prototypes and allows direct fixing of vertical cladding without battens. The difference in required thickness between girt members (120mm) and column members (90mm) is used as the space for aluminium glazing channels. Horizontal steel tie-rod forms bottom chord of truss. (structural engineer: Dale Simpson/ Perrett Simpson)

North Fitzroy House
Roof framing from standard repetitive prefabricated trusses. South-west corner cantilever is supported by an additional timber wall truss which sits over existing boundary wall and extends it by 850mm to pick up the façade truss. This last truss is painted white and lined with profiled fibreglass roof cladding on the outside face, with a simple lapped detail to the bottom edge providing a drip detail and flashing over the sashless 4-pane window. Mullion between window sections is 90x10mm galvanised steel flat bar, stiffened by the aluminium channel section jambs of the window itself. (structural engineer: Stephen Dodd)

Elwood House
Insulated reverse-block-veneer wall: reinforced masonry ground floor construction for flood resistance – requirement to insulate combines with urban notion of side fence. Window is in the gap between inner and outer condition. Method of detailing reinforces opening as a hole (fence) rather than frame (building) condition. Inner plywood lining acts as bracing for required cantilever at upper storey, fixed with clouts at 150mm centres. Plywood used as lining allows edgeless reveals and absence of trims. (structural engineer: Peter Felicetti)

RMIT Building 45
Dividing screen between inner and outer studio spaces. Upper level steel windows act as a beam to support top-hung sliding door track (fixed at 2450 cts to ex. concrete beams). Gap at top beam required for return air circulation. As thin as possible in relation to concrete structure (structural engineer: Dale Simpson/ Perrett Simpson)

Lyons Office
KDHW stud module relates to standard plywood sheet size. Studs at 600 centres (rather than 450) reduce need to cut sheets. Thinner (70x45) but stronger (F17) and more widely-spaced studs allow the same framing and cladding element to be used for all walls, windows and door frames. This allowed the entire construction to be erected by one trade, in a very limited time frame. The high ceiling height (4.4m) is divided into two equal stud wall sections of 2.2m height, with a 19x190mm timber plate acting in concert with sandwiched top and bottom plates to form a horizontal stiffening beam. Where additional vertical stiffening is required for longer-span walls, steel plate vertical and diagonal stiffeners are bolted between stud sections. (structural engineer: Dale Simpson/ Perrett Simpson)

Fitzroy Apartments
The exposed steel façade structure supports shutters, entry gates, balustrade rails and hangs ground level shopfront windows, but is also designed to provide lateral bracing for the building as a whole. The repetitive façade is detailed so as to disguise internal divisions and emphasise the building as an urban block. All ornamental metalwork derives its expression from structural and material principles. The large letters and numbers on front and rear entry gates provide lateral restraint to the vertical members allowing them to be unusually thin, the perforated sunscreen shutters are stiffened by pleat-folding aluminium hence do not require secondary framing and can be more ephemeral (as previously demonstrated by Herzog & de Meuron in their apartments at Rue des Suisses, Paris, 2000), and the repeated decorative pressings into galvanised sheet metal panels perform a stiffening function similar to a traditional cross-brake folding technique, allowing a thinner base material to be used. (structural engineer: Dean Armstrong/ Connell Wagner)
**DISCUSSION**

When architects think about detailing, it is often in obsessive terms. A passion for neatness, for working things out to the perfect degree, or of making things disappear, or appear 'perfect' lies behind the perfect degree, or of making things disappear in difficult ways, is also directly related to the high cost of most high-architecture. On the other hand, there are architects who dismiss detailing or precision as irrelevant and embrace the crudeness of commercial mass-construction for reasons of polemic.

Both these approaches contrast distinctly with what we have observed as the 'direct' or straightforward but also precise way in which things are put together in pragmatic, industrial and vernacular structures – where methods are laconic but highly efficient and have been honed over time through repetition.

So it was illuminating to read an interview with Anne Lacaton and Jean-Phillipe Vassal (and to hear Anne speak in Melbourne) where they discussed the way in which steel structures designed by fabricators/industrial engineers contain a high degree of difference, between the different sizes and section-type of individual members within that structure. Each piece of an industrial structure does its job and no more, with the most efficient steel member, regardless of a pre-determined notion of appearance. The real criterion is weight, which directly determines the cost of any fabricated steel construction as steel is priced by the tonne, irrespective of the shape it comes in. A structure designed by a steel fabricator is as light as possible, but also frequently varied and inconsistent. Nevertheless, the end result appears 'taut' and efficient - without fat – even though its visual logic may not be as tidy or readily apparent as a more architectural logic based on a predetermined aesthetic notion of what a steel frame should be:

“...We always work with the same engineer for metal structures. We get on really well with him. He's the one we worked with on the Latapie House project (1). He works a lot for industry, for oil-rig and launch pads... Aesthetics aren't his concern. He readily understood our objectives and our concern about cost-efficiency. He knew we wanted to construct a solid building at minimum cost. In metal: seeing that the cost is always 1.8-2 Euros the kilo, there's an absolute direct relationship between weight and price. Ever since the Latapie thing he knows we aren't obsessed by an “aesthetic of the structure’, but that on the other hand we do like to be as exacting as possible about systems efficiency. This explains, of course, why in Nantes (office building, 2002) the section of the posts diminishes from storey to storey. This diminution of the posts also considerably reduces the feeling you get in the building, but isn't the outcome of an a priori aesthetic...”

Thinking in a direct and straightforward manner, in terms of efficiency and the logical properties and performance of the pieces being used also applies to materials in general, such as the way sheets are joined/ lapped, or the architectural decision of which direction sheeting should run. In frame and girt/purlin type structures, such as most steel-framed industrial buildings and also the Somers House, cladding sheets typically run vertically as they are fixed directly to horizontal members, without battening, allowing for a continuity between the direction of roof and wall material from the top to the bottom of the building:

“...The polycarbonate that interests us consists of a single skin placed like sheeting. Sheet is, in spite of everything, one of the cleverest materials of our time! ...For the sheeting (for waterproofing) it suffices to resolve the overlapping of one sheet with another. And the waviness gives it tremendous rigidity. Double skins seem very complicated to us by comparison.

... We only use sheeting panels vertically: it's more modern! Putting them horizontally is an idea, it's contrary to the logic of their fixing. They're normally fixed, in fact, on ribs that are themselves fixed from one post to another. There again, water runs more naturally vertically than horizontally! ...”


It is interesting that for similar reasons in many rural Australian buildings corrugated sheeting is commonly used horizontally on side walls, as the wall framing in this case is vertical balloon-frame type timber studs. In more contemporary reverse brick-veneer or insulated timber construction, such as in the Elwood House, this logic changes again, as the standard vertical studs/ blockwork structure is laid over with horizontal battens to achieve an insulated air gap, which in turn means cladding boards are laid vertically, relating back to the usual manner of a timber fence.

On another note, the House in Imajuku (1978) by Kazunari Sakamoto is included here (2) for the way in which the logic of its repetitive timber structural frame is so didactically revealed in combination with the logic of the different openings required for different rooms. Sakamoto refers to this house as having a “strong mannered method”, meaning perhaps that it is both establishing and breaking understood
notions of construction/ structure and appearance/ composition. This project is an obvious reference for the house in Somers, and we were interested in the way in which allowing columns to pass through windows, provided a type of efficient freedom in permitting larger openings without special structural design, but also the way in which this exposing or revealing of what is behind worked in tension with the overall closedness of a shed.
12. RMIT BUILDING 45
Originally a rubber and tyre warehouse built in the early 1950s, and later the RMIT Union dental service. Our project was to recycle this building once again; as studio and workshop spaces for Architecture and Design.

In doing this, we sought to make use of and underline the straightforward urban qualities of this corner building as an economical space for student use, with a direct interface to the public realm at street level.

The building is an annexe to the main Architecture school, separate from the main central campus. Architecture students engage with the city and with the technical and training sections of the University as they walk to and from and mill around outside.

The building is shared between higher education and TAFE departments. Different groups of students arrive from different directions. Sharing of facilities is necessary and encouraged. An ‘as-found’ half-basketball court is re-utilised as circulation, making a space where the two groups can mix and compete with each other at lunchtime games.
The allocated brief of four studios and corridor was rearranged into four teaching alcoves of the smallest functional area, so that a non-specific (and non-bookable) space could be opened up, shared by all and useable by students 24 hours per day.

This configuration allows informal work to carry on while classes are in progress and for both students and staff to move freely between different modes of working and learning, individually or in groups. This is a natural way of working.

The open workspace, and the teaching alcoves which open off it, have something of the character of a studio: a work environment that is familiar and natural to students and architects but difficult to come by in the university. It is not like a classroom or an office, a computer lab, a workshop, or a gallery – but able to be parts of all of these at once.
Walking along Lygon Street, you come across a roller door that was always there – although closed for the past twenty years. A new glass shopfront entry is recessed behind this propped-open screen.

The entrance is a gallery space which leads through to the as-found basketball courtyard, previously a dead-end but now refocused into a primary social mixing space and a place for outdoor events and exhibitions.

This side circulation route was the original truck loading bay and the new works reinstate the through-path linking the public street to the deep campus behind. Re-glazing of existing openings and entrances allows the activities of the studio to engage directly with the street.
Each semester, the building is transformed into an exhibition venue for student work, with its front door open to Lygon Street. The foyer is not quite large enough for the crowd, so people spill out through the roller door and onto the footpath – opening up the building and making the event visible in the city.

The basketball court surfaces are able to be appropriated for different uses. The entry lobby becomes a bar, the print-room bench a place for preparing food, whiteboard surfaces become screens for projecting onto and exhibition spotlights cast shadows of the crowd onto the frosted glass street windows.
Design was a process of removal and emptying-out; revealing the original enclosure, and then carefully repairing and putting things back – as little as possible – to accommodate new functions without destroying the original sense of a flexible and tough multi-purpose space.

Considerable effort went into designing-out the paraphernalia that frequently occupies such institutional buildings so that surfaces and spaces could feel ‘empty’: security readers and light switches are mounted on the inside of door jambs, doors can be used as built-in whiteboard surfaces without secondary furniture, and the way in which light fittings are suspended minimises the need for cabling.

New divisions, surfaces, fittings and furniture work with and accentuate the existing structure. Design decisions reflected on the precise way in which one might remove and then intervene in such an environment.
Maintaining

Although the project in Elwood completely transforms the way in which the private site relates to its surroundings, the strategy maintains and continues the existing rules of the prevalent side fence condition. The building’s form is made through extruding and rendering physical (describing) its given boundary line.

At an urban scale, the building remains just a fence, and as such can merge into the background of other fences, but at the scale of direct experience new active and tactile ways of being within or in relation to this fence are offered, and the abstract line of the boundary is momentarily thickened.
RMIT Building 45
NMBW Architecture Studio
2007 - 2008

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Awards, 2009

Photography
Peter Bennetts
Buildings have physical substance. They enclose and define space (emptiness) but this enclosure is through material (matter). The relationship between the thing being enclosed and the enclosure – and hence the composite experiential effect - is mediated through a combination of the way the fabric of the building is put together and the physical qualities of the fabric itself.

Materials provide resistance to architectural ideas. For example, the abstract idea of a compound-curved surface is only knowable in experience in combination with the physical properties of the substance through which it has been executed: eg. the graininess and heavy viscosity of hard plaster, or the reflective faceted planes of a panelised surface.

Much architecture seeks to limit the imposition or resistance of material substance on the abstract constructs of architecture through the use of non-figurative/ non-directional materials such as painted plasterboard or render. Gypsum plasterboard has physical properties, of course, but we have become trained not to see them or to pretend that they are not there (and these properties do not appear in photographs). At the other end of the spectrum, there is architecture which is focused entirely on material qualities for their own sake.

Rather than choosing one direction or philosophy over another, we have been exploring across a series of works the nature of the relationship between material substance (matter, surface, colour), architectural constructs (spatial configurations, abstract relationships), and environmental effect (light, shadow, marks of use) in order to better understand the influence and effect of these unavoidable aspects of any built and experienced environment.

Many people have commented on the use of materials in our projects. This is not because the materials themselves are ‘interesting’ or unusual - the range of products used is fairly straightforward: plywood, aluminium, concrete block, profiled sheet metal, concrete, timber - but perhaps because the manner of their use makes one
aware of their particular qualities: qualities in the material’s own right, in comparative relation to other adjacent materials, and in relation to the construction ensemble as a whole.

**C-D face plywood**

Even though it is sometimes associated with cheapness, plywood is not the cheapest of available surface lining materials. It is, however, one of the most efficient, in that it performs on many levels at once. Plywood has a set of definite, discernible properties which can contribute to the construction process and also, importantly, have a type of resistance, meaning that these properties can still be understood in the final finished work:

1) It has equal bracing strength equally in all directions, and hence provides a structural membrane if fixed correctly. 2) It has a relatively strong, self-supporting edge – there is no need to trim or cover with architraves, skirtings, or other products used to cover less durable sheet linings. 3) It has a definite grain and figure which exerts a presence on the space and has a strong ornamental effect. This grain shows through any applied protective surface finish, such as oil, stain or paint. 4) It is able to withstand the weather, and can be used both internally and externally.

In all of these attributes plywood is the opposite of plasterboard. Plasterboard is homogenous, neutral, weak on its edge, requires paint, and cannot be used externally without protection. Its material properties are generally neutralized or obscured through the building process of stopping up, trowelling and painting. With the use of plywood, by comparison, it is possible to construct in a way where one is more conscious of the surface cladding, and hence also more aware of the act of cladding which has occurred.

The resistance/ presence of plywood, both physically and aesthetically, within a space means that the surface lining is not a neutral background or describer of form, but becomes active – operating more in an (ambiguous) middle-ground position within the overall architectural composition. Staining of the surface, which we generally have used in linseed oil, white or black semi-transparent coatings, transforms the material but also retains an understanding of its grain (its material presence). You are always aware of its underlying properties, and hence the structural similarity that
remains between areas of lining treated with different stains. The stain colour modifies the material, but does not control or erase it.

The type of plywood that we have used for linings is standard C-D face radiata pine bracing plywood (external grade), in a range of thicknesses – 7, 9, 12 and sometimes 16mm – depending on structural and other requirements which differ with each project. This material is able to be used both internally and externally, but is not really a ‘true’ internal (smooth) or external (durable) product. Again, plywood is ambiguous; it has a slightly rough, but also finished quality, on the threshold of internal and external properties, perfect for a porch, vestibule or other intermediate space.

Plywood has many of the tactile attributes of natural timber, but is in reality a manufactured product. It is stronger than timber of equivalent thickness, omni-directional (with mixed grain) and comes in sheet form: 1200x2400mm which is the industry standard module for a wide range of building systems. This manufactured but still tactile quality – another ambiguity – means that spaces lined in plywood have a very different quality to spaces lined in solid timber. Plywood is less connected with craft (and its associated high quality and cost), and more directly related to industrial processes and contemporary forms of systematic manufacture and construction.
RMIT Building 45

Lyons Office
Mill-finish aluminium

Mill-finish aluminium as a material has a position not dissimilar to C-D grade structural plywood. It has a distinct rawness (in comparison to natural anodized aluminium, for example) and is not generally considered as an internally finished or externally durable material due to the fact that it oxidizes, changes over time and shows traces of use. Nevertheless, mill-finish aluminium also displays an incredibly delicate quality of surface and light reflectivity, and was for many years used as an external material in building facades, window frames, etc. The fact that it changes or weather over time is an aesthetic rather than a purely practical factor – this is deemed not acceptable in the current era where predictability and uniformity is a general assumption for material performance.

We first used mill-finish aluminium for an external, non-loadbearing pergola structure over timber decks at the EQ restaurant at the Victorian Arts Centre. Aluminium was selected in consultation with structural engineer because of its light weight, greater range of section sizes and the ability to be fully TIG-welded into frames (like a truck bull-bar) allowing a very thin and efficient structure. Mill-finish aluminium was much cheaper than anodized or polished alternatives, but what was perhaps unexpected was the way that it reflected light in a particularly intense way, especially the coloured artificial light emanating from the large neon signs behind the glass. This reflection of blue/red light in mill aluminium became one of the main factors in the quality of the night-time image of the building.

Since that time, we have used mill-finish aluminium plate for reflective window sill ledges in many projects (Somers House, Elwood House) and the aluminium provides an abstract, thin but strong surface which has an overall softness (unlike the ‘hardness’ of stainless steel) but reflects a significant quantity of light into the interior (refer photos of B.45/ Elwood with shadows on ceiling). The intensity of light reflections in the mill-finished surface is very high, and this combined with the ‘natural’ and imperfect off-the-mill quality of the surface means, as in the discussion of C-D plywood above, that the material exerts a much stronger presence than is the case with more conventionally used anodized aluminium or stainless steel. You are aware of its rawness, its grain, its homogeneity and solidity: its aluminiumness.

For this reason, we have begun using mill-finish aluminium for doors and windows where environmental conditions are not extreme, such as for interior projects. In both Building 45 and the recently completed Building 88 teaching spaces for RMIT, mill-finish aluminium extrusions are used for door frames, and this material works together with C-D grade plywood lining and existing exposed concrete to create a raw, intense material experience which nevertheless is also quite delicate and subtle. The aluminium surface is affected by time and traces of use.
Aluminium pergolas
EQ Project

Reflective window sill
Elwood House
Reinforced concrete block
Concrete block is another material we have used for its somewhat ambiguous, mediating properties – which are related to its structural possibilities. It occupies an intermediate position between traditional clay brickwork and solid concrete. The cavity of a single skin of blockwork can be reinforced with steel bar and core-filled to form a vertical cantilever pier or section of self-supporting wall. Unlike brick construction, this structural ability can occur completely within a single skin of masonry (exposed on both sides), and does not require returns or engaged piers. And unlike in-situ or precast concrete walls and columns, concrete blockwork retains the flexibility and economy of modular masonry construction, providing its own formwork and is easily transported and handled. The module of the hollow block (400x200x140mm thick) imprints a texture and grain on the space which is not natural per se, but nevertheless connected to a tangible material process of both production (casting the block) and construction (laying it in place).

Moonee Ponds house: three parallel reinforced block walls are erected on a concrete slab base. The boundary walls of 140mm block are exposed on the inside face, with the outer surfaces lined in metal cladding over a batten air space. This provides a fire-rated, insulated and waterproof structural wall of minimal thickness. The inner reinforced wall is 190mm thick to enable the overall mass to be sufficient not to require insulation. This wall passes from outside to inside, and heating panels are attached on either side which utilise the wall’s thermal mass.

Elwood house: the same single-skin boundary wall structure was employed (insulated and clad externally) but this time openings were possible on the side boundary line. To span the opening, standard blocks were cut in half, turned on their side and filled with reinforced concrete to form a ‘bond beam’ lintel: emphasising the homogeneity and material presence of the blocks as a combined structural system and surface.
Curlewis house: the external south-facing wall is thickened to accommodate various services and functional niches: coats cupboard, wine cellar, entrance porch, fireplace, stair, window seat, storage, toilet room. The blockwork mass is constructed through a combination of structural (140mm thick) and non-structural (90mm thick) components, which are revealed as such at junctions and edges. The blockwork provides a tactile but uniform backdrop with which other materials are brought into combination: steel lintels, concrete floors and seat ledges, timber sills, and glass panes held in the cavity between two brick skins. Externally, reinforced block columns (2 blocks wide/800x140mm) are used to take the horizontal bracing loads of a large verandah roof, enabling vertical steel columns to be as thin as possible (76mm diameter). This structural principle was developed further in the exposed substructure of the elevated house at Sorrento.
Sorrento House under construction
DISCUSSION

While we are working and thinking about these types of issues, we are also of course looking all the time at works of others who have dealt with similar or related thoughts before.

“We were concerned with the seeing of materials for what they were: the woodness of wood; the sandiness of sand.”

- Alison and Peter Smithson, “The ‘As Found’ and the ‘Found’”, 1990

Donald Judd has produced many works using mill-finished aluminium, coloured anodized aluminium, raw plywood and galvanized sheet metal. In each case the quality of the material itself is in a direct tension/a strong dialogue with the quality of the object made from it. Judd’s exploration and analysis of material properties is perhaps most clearly evidenced in his long series of aluminium works – such as the array of aluminium boxes in the artillery halls at Marfa, Texas (1). Continuous side lighting gives these large pieces an ethereal presence, emphasizing through repetition the softness of what is a hard and precise material, and reflecting in ever-different blurred smudges the equally hard concrete columns of the industrial structure he renovated to exhibit them. In Judd’s work, raw material properties can be understood as questions, or propositions, in their somewhat ambiguous composition with both form and arrangement (2,3):

“A shape, a volume, a colour, a surface is something itself. It shouldn’t be concealed as part of a fairly different whole. The shapes and materials shouldn’t be altered by their context. One or four boxes in a row, any single thing or such a series, is local order, just an arrangement, barely order at all. The series is mine, someone’s, and clearly not some larger order. It has nothing to do with either order or disorder in general. Both are matters of fact. The series of four or six doesn’t change the galvanized iron or steel or whatever the boxes are made of.”

- Donald Judd, “Statement”, 1977

Hiroshi Nakao demonstrates the experiential effects of material-colour on space and on bodies within that space in an intense way. Nakao’s work takes ‘blackness’, for example, to an extreme level, as in his small weekend house: ‘Dark Box/ Bird Cage’ where every surface inside and out is black, and there is no direct horizontal light in or view out. The resulting state of semi-darkness, however, puts attention on the light that is caught in the black surfaces, on what is around; emphasising reflections and differences within the subtly different material and light conditions. His representations of the works in solarized photographs emphasise and make visually apparent the intensity of the material experience of these interiors (4):

“This small house, both interior and exterior is totally painted black. A single exception is bathroom that is white. Particularly, the external wall shines black with use of glossy paint. For the interior, ceilings, walls and floors are painted black also. Black is weak colour. We do not talk about its image, but spatially black reacts to light sensitively. Its features change immediately with a subtle flicker of light. Or black visualizes a pile of dust. Slight white particles begin to accumulate easily. Black is not rigid silence, but a ceaseless stir. In films directed by Lang, for example, black has various colour sounds. On the other hand, it might be said that a colourful play has frequently stiffened space to monotonous gray.”

1
2
3
4
These examples are very pure – indeed Judd’s work is in the realm of art, which is fundamentally removed from the complexities and multiplicities of function, and Nakao also occupies an overlapping space between architectural and art practice. Experiencing and studying such works – and considering each in itself as a ‘study’ – can teach us a lot about the properties of pure material, colour and light, and different combinations of these in relation to each other and to us through interaction and experience.

But architecture which is embedded in the dirty social and economic fabric of urbanity is not the same as this type of art practice. It is always working in combination with things outside of itself, outside of its control. In thinking of substance and material effect in our works, we aim for a focused ‘balancing’ of the particular qualities and properties of a limited but nevertheless differentiated palette of materials – in relation to their specific environment. Often, this material balancing is to do with including and making sense of (clarifying) an existing or found condition. It is also to do with an attitude towards making ‘soft’ spaces which can be ambiguous, are accommodating of difference, and able to take part in everyday life. The balance and disposition of the different material properties required to make an architectural space creates its mood and ambience. This balancing and combination is of course occurring at the same time as other balancings, such as that between plan groupings and un-groupings, or between the ‘presence’ or strength of structure and non-structure, all of which simultaneously affect perception.

RMIT Building 45, materials 1:1
model for 2008 Venice Biennale
14a. PIONEER MUSEUM PLAZA
This small public project is the first built outcome of a much broader urban design project, which seeks possibilities to seed a sustainable future for Jeparit, a small (pop. 300) wheatbelt town in the Wimmera-Mallee region of north-west Victoria.

Due to the extremely limited and fragile economy of these places, the urban plan sought out localised ‘pressure points’ such as the Pioneer Museum where small and achievable interventions could produce a significant effect.

One of the main aims of the longer-term urban strategy is to more strongly connect the town with the Wimmera River environment which enfolds it, even letting the river landscape ‘infiltrate’ public spaces and vacant blocks of the diminishing township.

The Pioneer Museum is a key site for Jeparit; it is one of the few functioning public institutions in the town, has a strong volunteer base and is highly visible as the first town structure from the main highway approach. Its close proximity to the multiple waterways and billabongs of the Wimmera River means the site can also act as an entrance for both locals and visitors to the extensive network of walking trails and bird watching opportunities currently ‘hidden’ behind levee banks of the river.

The existing museum was surrounded by a 3-metre high chainlink security fence. Through considerable negotiation we persuaded the museum volunteers that the collection could be rearranged and security re-thought. By moving the front fence line back to butt into the sides of the main building a new public entrance forecourt was created, where the building becomes an active gatehouse (for both museum and town) as well as an exhibit.
The design of the various new elements is derived from arrangements and techniques found in the town and surrounding areas, sometimes amplified for extra effect.

Existing materials and techniques were borrowed, continued and elaborated upon. Design was a process of studying and observing carefully the region and the way things were done there, noting the pragmatic directness of local solutions, understanding what skills existed, and what was not possible.

A palette of simple public elements can form the basis for future related works in the area as the town evolves.
A series of precast concrete furniture elements were designed, and made locally. They are light enough to transport, but heavy enough to be simply placed on the ground, without foundations.

Some concrete pieces were specially cast, and some were off-the-shelf items. The tables combine standard pipe and base sections with reinforced cast tops. The pipes come in different lengths, allowing different height tables. The pipe legs are stabilised by half-filling with sand and bolting to the precast tops.

We drew a perfect hemisphere for the top of the bollards, but they ended up being cast from an old air-compressor cylinder end, making a somewhat flatter shape which was better for sitting on.
A new shade structure adds to the shade of the ironbark river trees, making a softly-defined space for individuals or groups to gather under, between the existing verandah and the river. The furniture spills out from this covering, towards the raised floor of the verandah and in relation to the trees. On the high point of the levee bank, a new platform acts as a marker and reference point, visible from both museum and river. Its circular form makes a small space within the larger environment, and looks in all directions.
The fixed budget of $70,000 was strategically spread across the new front fence, improved access, landscaping, lighting, signage, security, repairs and painting to the existing building and public seating.

The new facilities of the plaza serve both the museum and the river precinct – in fact they seek to join the two.

Visitors may stop and choose to enter the museum or just look through the fence and wander down to the river. School groups can hold outside classes or eat lunch after visiting the museum exhibits.

The verandah space of the existing building is lit and allowed to be used as a shaded public resting place, pointing out and making use of its generosity in a sparse and spare environment.
Pioneer Museum Plaza
NMBW Architecture Studio
+Urban Architecture Laboratory, RMIT
2005 - 2007

Project Team
Nigel Bertram
Lucinda McLean
Marika Neustupny
with:
Shane Murray
Carey Lyon
Fiona Harrisson
Laura Harper
Sarah Trotter

First published
Landscape Architecture Australia
No.120, November 2008
pp.56-58
review: Delia Teschendorff

Architect Victoria
Awards 2008 issue, pp.52, 66-67

Awards
The Regional Prize
Australian Institute of Architects (Vic)
Awards, 2008

Architecture Award
Small Architecture Category
Australian Institute of Architects (Vic)
Awards, 2008

Photography
NMBW
14b. LYONS OFFICE
We were presented with the remarkable space of an old department store in the centre of the city. It had a very deep plan, four-metre high ceilings, and a series of large civic-scale windows along Swanston and Bourke St frontages. The brief was to establish a new workspace for eighty people.

We started with thinking about how to arrange the worktables in the space. Rows of desks are each aligned with one of the large windows, which also orients each desk in relation to the structure above.

This made a field of workstations, with desks slightly further apart than normal, providing many possible circulation routes rather than a single strong hierarchy.
Project teams can grow and shrink as required around small offices and meeting rooms, which gently subdivide the field of desks. These small rooms and the larger conference rooms work together with the existing structure; delineating and articulating it in different ways, so that new and old form a kind of composite whole.

The perimeter of the floor is given over to communal uses: kitchen’ lunch room, library and shared casual work-space. Conference room and small meeting rooms work as a suite, with the foyer as a breakout space. Meetings and work can happen here as well. Reception is located under the large diagonal beams of the previous escalator bay.
In the long section there are a series of desks lining up with large windows beyond, and in the cross-section the main workspace is set in from the glare, leaving the perimeter as a shared, casual space. Even though the plan is deep, there is always a sense of connection to light, looking from enclosed spaces, through the field of workstations, to the large windows beyond.
Small rooms are set within the space, looking over the open plan areas. The desks in the enclosed office spaces are oriented to be continuous with the desks outside.

Highlight windows were inserted where services were not present, allowing light to pass through these small enclosures.

A wall system was devised made from 70mm timber studs and 1200mm plywood sheets. The walls were made as thin as possible to slot into the existing niches of concrete columns, and slide up over beams.

The walls were made very quickly, by only one trade. There is no finish on the plywood. At half-height there is a timber stiffening-beam rail, which joins the top and bottom plates of the two equal stud wall sections, and allows the thin wall to span the full four metres.

Because of their thinness, the walls have a taut, provisional quality in comparison to the solidity of the concrete.

From inside, the timber rail provides a place for sliding door tracks to be hung. In the window reveals you can see the timber stiffening rail, bolted to top and bottom plates, with glazing fixed to the front face of the studs.
A series of tables for quiet work, small discussions or reading, where individuals or small groups are ‘outside’ the office and in direct contact with the city.

Door panels are supported on an aluminium ledge, which also provides a place to clip a lamp and rest pens.

We studied the drawing tables in Antonin Raymond’s summer studio in Karuizawa. This is a city version of that idea, able to be shared and scaled to the building.

The tables are resting provisionally on the ledge, as if they could be removed at any time.

As the time-scale of the building is perhaps one hundred years, and the time-scale of a tenancy is something less than that.
Lyons Office
NMBW Architecture Studio
2008 - 2009

Project Team
Nigel Bertram
Lucinda McLean
Marika Neustupny
with:
Ralf Rehak

First published
Artichoke Magazine
No.31 July/ August 2010
Contents/ Inside back cover/ pp.44-50
review: Marcus Baumgart

Architektur Innenarchitektur Technischer Ausbau (AIT, Germany)
Issue 10.2010
pp.114-119
review: Petra Stephan

Architecture Australia
November/ December 2010, pp.92, 113

Architect Victoria
Awards 2010 issue, p.31

The Age
Wednesday May 19 2010, p.8
(Business section)
review: Stephen Crafti

Awards
Architecture Award
Interior Architecture
Australian Institute of Architects (Vic)
Awards, 2010

National Award for Interior Architecture
Australian Institute of Architects Awards
2010

National Commendation for Sustainable Architecture
Australian Institute of Architects Awards
2010

Photography
Peter Bennetts
Furniture is a medium through which bodies come into contact with the city. Architecture is often the spatial container for this relationship, however concrete physical engagement between individual bodies and the group condition of the city is most directly achieved through furniture and the act of furnishing. Through everyday actions - by pulling up a chair, leaning against a wall, resting on a ledge - we furnish and appropriate the space around us in an act of (temporary) customisation.

In the category of furniture can also be included fittings, fixtures, and other parts of buildings which are touched, or are not required structurally so much as operationally. Over the series of projects represented here, we have become increasingly conscious of the role of such furniture, in relation to the architecture, to the urban environment, and to the way in which spaces are occupied and inhabited.

(In certain cases it could be argued that the architecture has itself become furniture; or acts like furniture in relation to its environment.)

The first question is how to think about the making (or fixing) of such pieces in relation to thoughts on the making of the primary spatial enclosure. In the Somers House this issue came into focus, as the fittings required for domestic life were one of the key differences between occupying this structure as a dwelling and occupying it as an agricultural building or shed. In a house more furniture is required. The fittings came into two categories; off-the-shelf proprietary items, and purpose-made items. We treated each as clearly distinct from the primary enclosure though essential to the composition as a whole. The effect is that items such as the outdoor shower, light fittings, or custom-made hanging rails are deliberately ‘placed-on’, rather than integrated-into or concealed-within the building. That is, their role as ‘fixtures’ is explicitly maintained. There is an implication that these items could simply be removed, pulled off, and the building could revert back to another type of use. This effect heightens an understanding of the current occupation as provisional or contingent, and the non-seamless, non-integrated quality in relation to the architecture points to these furnishings as moments of customisation.
So can the act of furnishing (appropriating) a space also clarify something about that space… through demonstrating what is required to, or desirable to customise? Just as the act of building can be a tool for observing certain things about a location, the act of furnishing can be a tool which teaches us about our environment through its ability (or inability) to accommodate actions. Furniture is evidence of use.

This way of thinking relates to simultaneous observations on customisation and appropriation occurring spontaneously in the urban environment. One conclusion drawn from the *By-Product-Tokyo* research, for example, was that ‘lack of fit’ (eg. too much or too little of something) was often a trigger for appropriation and customisation to occur – that is, for an activity other than originally intended or imagined to take place. Similarly, if an architectural space is not itself fully tailored to accommodate the needs of one particular activity, then the possibility of other activities occurring (through different customisations) is heightened.

At the Pioneer Museum Plaza in Jeparit, a combination of physical remoteness and economic necessity led to a way of working that had as little on-site work as possible. The project is almost entirely furniture. A suite of self-weighted precast concrete items was developed that could be lifted into place without foundations. The self-weighted concrete pieces have a heaviness and substance which fits with the expectation of ‘public works’, however in the manner with which they are placed and in their literal relationship to the ground there is also a heightened sense of the provisional. The real impact of these works is completely insubstantial in terms of the scale and time of the landscape itself – the ground is not permanently altered – however the new furniture gives ‘just enough’ to indicate how people might engage with and occupy this location. Each item has a purpose, but is not explicitly designed solely for one thing. The vehicle bollards are also possible to sit on, benches are extra long and wide and are arranged to facilitate outdoor class discussions as well as picnics, tables are oversized and at different heights and act as platforms of non-determined use. The circular ring-bench is a place for standing and looking, or for running around in circles, as much as for sitting.

The arrangement of furniture can make an urban (or architectural) space, and it can also reveal something about the nature of that space by suggesting and
responding to ways in which we might physically engage with it as individuals and small groups. Loose furniture is generally considered as subsidiary to the building envelope, which itself is subsidiary to a master plan or urban structure. However it is also possible to think of furniture as creating urban structure… or at least of a bottom-up process where furniture, building enclosure and urban condition are considered simultaneously and evenly.

The Lyons office occupies the space of an old department store with a very deep plan and four-metre high ceilings. Its robust concrete floors, soffit and columns show traces of many previous uses. There was an understanding from the commencement of the project that any fitout of this space would, in comparison to the time-scale of the building, be temporary. This condition is true of any commercial tenancy, but was particularly explicit here. The project became the orchestration of a kind of ‘camping’ in the space.

To that end, all of the new work can be considered as furniture; including literal loose furniture, but also the new walls, doors, floor finishes and services. The act of furnishing clarifies aspects of the existing condition, and also of the nature of the activities and which take place in this architectural workspace. The design starts with the arrangement of desks - in relation to windows, existing structural bays and each other – producing a field of worktables and a non-hierarchical circulation pattern. Fixed rooms interrupt and gently subdivide this field, but their manner of construction and materiality is close to that of furniture. The structural thinness of the wall system gives it a taut, membrane-like quality in relation to the massive concrete base building, emphasising its nature as the temporary infill of something much larger and more substantial. This sense is also evident in the row of window tables along the west façade: spaces of quiet work or discussion for individuals and small groups, removed from the main workspace of computers and phones, yet placed in direct contact with the outside world. These small, personal tables are hung tentatively from the sills of the large existing openings which provide daylight to the whole interior. Personal and urban scales come into direct contact with each other through the furnishing of this edge. The presence of the window tables demonstrates the engaging size and height of the openings, through relation to the action of sitting.
Somers House, domestic fixtures
Pioneer Museum Plaza
self-weighted precast furniture
Elwood House, pipe handrail
RMIT Building 45, trestle tables
Couch for movie-watching
(Nigel Bertram and Marika
Neustupny, Tokyo 2003)
Furniture has been studied and designed by many noted architects over history. Iconic chair designs from the likes of Josef Hoffman, Gerrit Rietveld, Mies van der Rohe, Marcel Breuer, and Charles and Ray Eames are part of the legacy of modern architecture. But in this chapter I would like to distinguish between the design of furniture in an industrial sense – the way in which Mario Bellini, for example, might design a beautiful dining chair – and the deployment of furniture in relation to space as a strategy for understanding, suggesting and activating the use of that space by people in different ways.

Loose furniture, particularly, is powerful in a public or semi-public context as it can be moved and respond in real-time to changing circumstances. The individual chairs of the Jardin du Luxembourg in Paris are perhaps the most famous example of this; where single metal-framed chairs can be arranged in groups and adjusted by individuals to respond to weather, view and social circumstances – allowing a surprisingly free and casual appropriation of the formal geometric spaces of the grounds. The feasibility of this of course depends on a management and security regime and understood protocols of behaviour. In their *Study for the Arrangement of Chairs* (2002) SANAA continue the dynamic social potential of this idea: “scattering many single chairs across the park offers a pleasant landscape for groups of people and individuals alike” (1). Many contemporary cafes have also realised the social flexibility of providing a combination of different furniture types – some fixed and some moveable, some custom-made and some appropriated – so that customers can form their own informal groupings and modify the urban realm to suit the situation.

Furniture creates architectural/urban space. The urban marketplace is a traditional example, where the setting up of temporary tables and stalls in a plaza or square creates both a new spatial condition and a social event (2 - Ljubljana marketplace, 2006). The flexibility of such urban transformations has been studied many times but attempts to replicate its simple effectiveness often complicate the infrastructure with provision of all-inclusive contemporary requirements such as wind protection, shelter, lighting, heating, and so on. The traditional model works through a combination of fixed architectural/urban and loose furniture elements (rather than the furniture having to be designed to provide everything). Protection from rain might be an external covered walkway, verandah or colonnade, and protection from wind achieved through the enclosure of an urban square or by setting up stalls against an existing wall. In this way, the furniture component can be lighter, simpler and more immediate. Such working in combination; between fixed and mobile elements, simple and complex elements, custom-designed and appropriated elements is a strategy for providing an economic and immediate type of user-driven flexibility.

Theatre performers and designers inherently understand and work with the relationship between the human body, flexibility of space (the same stage having to suit multiple scenes or narratives) and ‘props’, or furniture-like items that mediate between individual bodies and that space. Over numerous stage designs, Peter Corrigan has created fully-integrated combinations of the human body and its spatial movement, make-up and expression, costume and ornament, moveable and changeable furniture, lighting, and both fixed and moveable sets. In many cases,
the number of items or amount of material is extremely frugal, but always the maximum combinatory effect is sought. In his design for the Gilgul production of *Es Brent* (1992, director Barrie Kosky) a steel-framed inhabitable furniture-like object is moved around the stage space and modified by the actors over the course of the performance; the same piece adapting to multiple narrative scenarios (3). Its manifestations range from cage to puppet theatre set to gymnastic equipment to magic box. In each case, the theatrical design combines the role of actors (bodies, costume, colour), the foreground furniture/scaffold, and the background or enclosure, formed by a permeable wall of timber palettes. Music played on an upright piano during the performance adds another combination of furniture, body and theatre. Corrigan’s theatre sets demonstrate an intense and charged but also light and free architectural space; a type of space that almost disappears as soon as you reach out to touch it. His designs demonstrate the combinatory power of furniture and its mediating/empowering role between individuals, groups of bodies and the spaces they occupy.

*Impromptu chair polo match, RMIT Building 45 Matchpoint.Melbourne exhibition, 2010*
The following texts were written after the work, during the course of compiling this document. They are presented here as records or ‘samples’ of conversations had.

The short piece by Ricardo Flores and Eva Prats written from their office in Barcelona in 2010, is based on a discussion between Flores-Prats and NMBW going back to their visit to Melbourne in 2007, at the invitation of Rachel Neeson. Their architecture, writing and teaching work with and reinforce a strong local architectural culture. They studied and worked with Enric Miralles, introduced us to the work of Josep Llinas, and allowed us to see the work of Gaudi in Barcelona and the Catalan tradition in a new way. Flores-Prats talk of working ‘gently’ with the city – working with it, adjusting it, studying it; rather than reacting to it in an iconic or iconoclastic way. This sensibility sits very well with that of NMBW. Their observation of the NMBW work presented here, and noting the way that it also observes its environment and points to or heightens an awareness of its surroundings, is possibly the closest someone has come in text to capturing the spirit of the work:

"...the works talk about other thing happening around them, so you know that by looking carefully at them your eye will get prepared to perceive the quality of other things happening around you. We could say that their projects act as observation-training-constructions."

(see article following)

The transcript of a conversation with Kim Halik is included as a sample of the many similar discussions had over the course of making these projects; while walking around looking at buildings, while driving, or while sitting in the office looking at photographs and drawings. Kim has acted as a critic and collaborator over this time, often questioning or coming up with a way of seeing things which we had not considered, or reminding us of other projects. His views and expertise are slightly tangential to mine and those of NMBW as a group, but he understands intimately the positioning and aim of our work and its techniques, and shares a love of local everyday buildings. The overlapping of interests and importantly also the slight friction of emphasis or interpretation has been a very fruitful catalyst over time, in pushing the work forward.
LOOK TWICE.
ABOUT NMBW WORK,
BY RICARDO FLORES AND
EVA PRATS.

On the cover of Architecture Australia of July/August 2008, there is a group of people riding bicycles, reflected upon a dark canal of water. The darkness of this part of the water is due to a beautiful old tree, placed behind the cycling people. Behind this tree there is a fence of a private garden. Following it, in the direction of pedalling, we can see that this fence is changing height, getting as tall as the trees next to it. Is it protecting another kind of garden? A tree garden?

We can notice now a big window inside the fence, with its glass reflecting other trees... It seems that the fence is now protecting an interior; there might be a house behind it. Yes, look twice, it is a house by NMBW.

Their work appears gradually, without imposing. This kind of “Zelig” attitude, this capacity of extreme kindness or empathy for others that makes the project dissolve in the place, is a rare capacity inside the actual architectural world.

What is really interesting in the work of this team, is that they have managed to turn this concern for the qualities on site into an ability of design that happens at all scales. You can read this concern in the general, in the rhythm, and in the detailing of the junctions between materials.

This is what makes it so interesting to look at their work, because the works talk about other thing happening around them, so you know that by looking carefully at them your eye will get prepared to perceive the quality of other things happening around you. We could say that their projects act as observation-training-constructions. Like the house on the cover of the magazine, explaining about the good walks or rides along the canal, in a peaceful neighbourhood where the quality is more in the trees than in the buildings themselves.

For a team that accepts the outside reality as a learning field, it is surprising to know that all three are involved as academics, because their way of learning and acting is not often thought inside a school. They do not only teach, but also have been involved in the latest renovation of a classroom building for the school of architecture at RMIT in Melbourne. Looking at the plans, you can see that they have organized the students working as close to the street as possible. Growing from this street contact, they have organized the rest of the plan, so it is always possible to look out, to listen out. We can also have a look at the exercises they propose to their students, and realise how serious they are in introducing their anti-academic way of learning inside the university. The exercises are strict tests of observation, testing the capacity of students to read almost invisible situations in every day life... We imagine how difficult it might be for young students of architecture, to be trained to not make a step before they can explain carefully what is already happening there, and at the end discover that the exercise is mainly this: observation is the goal, no hurry for design.
NB It was quite a precise moment of change, it was

KH How did that gesture emerge in the design? Can

NB When you look at the building you don't realise that

KH Because it looks like the holes were made so you

NB Yes well that was a mistake. We hadn't accounted

KH What specifically was the phenomenon on the site

NB It was about picking up on a kind of large scale, an

KH Is that something that you've thought about in

NB Yes well that was a mistake. We hadn't accounted

KH No I mean in terms of inside the building, like a

NB The base reference is just the ridge line.

KH That is something that you've thought about in

NB I think a lot of the shifts in other projects, such as

KH That's what I think is interesting about this, it's

NB: In fact it was irrelevant also to the builder, the builder

KH It's quite subtle. And yet it has a sort of an affinity to,

NB In fact it was irrelevant also to the builder, the builder

KH No I mean in terms of inside the building, like a

NB The base reference is out here (outside the building

KH Because there's only actually one right-angle in that

NB The base reference is just the ridge line.

KH: Is that something that you've thought about in

NB I think a lot of the shifts in other projects, such as

KH: That's what I think is interesting about this, it's

NB For whatever reason we were very interested in

KH: No I mean in terms of inside the building, like a

NB In fact it was irrelevant also to the builder, the builder

KH No I mean in terms of inside the building, like a

NB: In fact it was irrelevant also to the builder, the builder

KH: That's what I think is interesting about this, it's

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NB: In fact it was irrelevant also to the builder, the builder

KH: That's what I think is interesting about this, it's

NB: In fact it was irrelevant also to the builder, the builder
NB: If we look back, for example, we spent quite a lot it [the radial geometry] has got nothing to do with
KH: Well that’s right, it’s autonomous but there’s no
NB: It [the radial geometry] has got nothing to do with
ON MODERNITY
KH: Saying that our works have always been attuned to
NB: We were thinking about what is the difference
KH: That at the end of the day it is not ordinary, it is a
NB: Like the Nurses headquarters? [Venturi & Short,
NB: There are a lot of the gestures of surrealism in it too, in that kind of
KH: Well there is a kind of naïvety about Murcutt, not
KH: That is another thing that’s been discussed (I would completely agree with what you’re saying, even
KH: That’s right, yes.
NB: …because we’re not able to. We know too much.
NB: It’s totally shifted out of the ordinary, and it’s the
KH: No. I think that’s really interesting, because we often talk about things like the familiar and the strange, but from a sense of the uncanny, or something…
NB: …with that transformation. Is that what you mean? That at the end of the day it is not ordinary, it is a highly crafted architectural piece.
KH: So there are the conceptual poles that you situate yourself between?
NB: If we look back, for example, we spent quite a lot of time thinking about where the floor level was in relation to the ground. There was actually a bit of a swale that comes through, when it floods the water goes under, it’s a bit like a flood plain. So at this end (east) because the floor steps down for various reasons, it kind of engages with the ground. There is a step down to make it level with the verandah to the existing house, but we then stepped it up (towards the west), so that the floor in the outdoor room is about 600-700mm above the ground; about table height or maybe a type of high chair height. We were discussing the idea that the building was neither floating nor was it grounded. It’s that almost accidental relationship (with the ground) which you see all over the place…(4)
KH: …because the shed form is semantic, but we’re saying no, its got no meaning it’s just a found object, it means that we didn’t have to invent that form, all we did is adjust it. So we found, or conceptually found this thing and then kind of adjusted the idea.
NB:: …because to me pop [in the American sense] is too caught up with all the signifying practices and wanting to be semantic, where as I don’t think your work…
NB: …I think that’s one thing we’re definitely trying not to be and that’s semantic. So we’re saying, in a sense you could argue, if you were a post-modernist, that the shed form is semantic, but we’re saying no, its got no meaning it’s just a found object, it means that we didn’t have to invent that form, all we did is adjust it. So we found, or conceptually found this thing and then kind of adjusted the idea.
KH: That was the interesting thing with the early work of [Robert] Venturi which was much closer to that European sensibility to do with surrealism. Then the whole pop thing, I think, took over with him very rapidly and his work descended into kitsch quite quickly. It didn’t maintain that tension that his early first works had…
NB: Like the Nurses headquarters? [Venturi & Short, North Penn. Visiting Nurse Association Headquarters building, 1960]…
KH: That’s the right kind of power. I think because they were refusing that whole semantic ‘African culture’ thing, and then I don’t think he was able to maintain that, or he just decided that that it was not going to make him successful enough and he abandoned it. Whereas I think the advantage of Australian culture is that it’s a little bit outside the pressure of that American culture, of being successful at a commercial level…
NB: …at a global level.
KH: On a global level and in terms of architectural trends, that you can follow this direction. I think that’s a very Australian thing too; that sense of slight independence on an intellectual level.
NB: Yes, that’s really interesting because I had not thought of surrealism but there is a sense of the consciousness of the act of transformation that is unavoidable (in the work)…
KH: Well Ian McDougall’s early works have a consciousness for that as well, surrealism and the vernacular. [See for example, Elderly Persons Units, Cheddar Rd Reservoir, 1983-85 (6) and Kensington Community Health Centre, Melbourne, 1981-85.]
NB: Well these are all things we look at and like; Ian’s early work and Venturi’s early work. I wanted to go back to this image [fence-building, Wonthaggi, Victoria – photographed 2006 (7)] and just think about this. I guess maybe what you can see in this image is a slightly surreal sort of a strange yet familiar composition. But also we’re aware of how impossible it is to do something as naive (KH: as laconic) and as powerful as that.
KH: There are images like this in Venturi’s first book Complexity and Contradiction [eg. Miess House Project, 1962 (8)]. So that’s one level, but the other level I think, getting away from the form aspect, is to do with that idea of the division of territory, going back to that division of the ground plane that you were talking about in Division and Multiplication.
What the suggestion here is that you put a boundary around a plot of land and then you have that building along the edge of it. Which is a bit like the Smithsons’ Upper Lawn Pavilion, which is an example that keeps on coming back. [Alison and Peter Smithson, Solar Pavilion, Upper Lawn, Fonthill Estate, Wiltshire, 1959-1962 (9,10)]

NB: …the Smithsons’ Upper Lawn Pavilion, which is an example that keeps on coming back. [Alison and Peter Smithson, Solar Pavilion, Upper Lawn, Fonthill Estate, Wiltshire, 1959-1962 (9,10)]

ON THE SUBURB…

NB: …the Smithsons’ Upper Lawn Pavilion, which is an example that keeps on coming back. [Alison and Peter Smithson, Solar Pavilion, Upper Lawn, Fonthill Estate, Wiltshire, 1959-1962 (9,10)]

KH: But what is also interesting about this is the sense of the informality in the way the ground plane is used, this is really to me, this is like Jepart, this is almost like a little fragment of what you did in Jepart. Its interesting this sense of finding - in the middle of the city, I mean it really is in the middle of the city, almost a fragment of some kind of rural condition…

This is a clear connection but one that I had not fully realised before. In 2004 NMBW had studied the soft edges of roads and paths and the rich potential of undefined and loose spaces found in the small Victorian wheat belt towns of Rainbow and Jepart, with a broad team of collaborators including Kim Hall and one of the clients for the Elwood House, Carey Lyon (Rainbow + Jepant Urban Design Plan, 2004).

NB: That’s literally the gravel or ‘soft edges’ as we called them in Jepart, where the road just merged with the verge (12), there are lots of empty sites with no fences in the county. And we discussed it with the clients: you know you couldn’t do that with any normal client, we didn’t really have a normal client. This idea that you give something away in order to gain something; by giving that piece of land a porosity, by giving something up, you also then gain the ‘borrowing’ of this whole space out here [beyond the boundary] as an extension of the site. It works in two directions; by removing the fence and making the boundary informal.

KH: It strikes me, it’s a very courageous act, both on the client’s part and yours. Because a lot of clients would just freak out at the idea that the internal space of their property is just so literally open. You know kids could just come in there and spray cans and do whatever they like… and the interesting thing is they probably wouldn’t…

NB: …they don’t. When they put up their previous fence, a palisade fence, it was graffitied in about three minutes, but this one – touch wood – has not been graffitied yet. We have a few sensor lights around, which are lighting entry gates and things.

NB: Because the category of this land here (the easement), is a little bit like that Griffin common… it’s not really for anything. Well now it’s a path, it does go from somewhere to somewhere, and is used. But this land, it doesn’t appear on any map, it’s not a road but there’s some sort of ‘as of right’ provision to get down to a garage two doors down. And it’s maintained as part of the easement of the drain, the Elwood Canal.

KH: Which is interesting, it’s a sense that a Utopia could come about out of an infrastructure. I’m not sure whether Griffin had similar propositions.

NB: Both up here in the use of the roof terrace and of the external stair, there is an idea of establishing this boundary of the property but then also breaking it down by physically walking over here, by throwing the circulation of the private realm into the public.

KH: Well you know what this relates to, quite strongly I think, which links in with the Griffin thing and the Utopian suburban tradition, is also the Weissenhof [Weissenhof Siedlung, Stuttgart, 1927].

NB: That image of the rooftop garden and the circulation up… and that sense of that connection with almost a suburban realm within the Weissenhof, within the actual housing estate. I think that image (roof terrace image in tree tops) really is very striking because it just makes me think of all those houses in the thirties by those different architects in Stuttgart. [eg. apartments by Mart Stam with ‘outdoor room’, Stuttgart, 1927 (14)]

NB: I’ve never thought of that, but we were actually thinking of the stair as an Elwood thing.

KH: Well it is.

NB: This house used to have a 1920s stair that we had to demolish, we thought, ‘oh well we’ll demolish subdivision, Mount Eagle, 1916 (13)]

NB: …no fences, which has since, largely, been fenced.

KH: Yes, so I think it’s interesting that there’s this sense of trying to re-embark some of the, if you like, spatial implications of those propositions.

NB: This house used to have a 1920s stair that we had to demolish. We started off with designs with stairs that came down to the front yard and all sorts of things, but that was a bit of a security problem so we ended up with this stair that popped out at the first level so you still get that public interaction, of the Elwood flats, you know those kind of Hollywood style flats with the big masonry stairs (15). We could get that kind of interactive quality back but still it was actually private. But I’ve never thought of this, obviously you do a roof terrace and you think of modern ‘types’, of modernism and the Weissenhof era, but I had never thought of the expressed stair getting up there as part of that connection.

KH: I think linking it back to the Weissenhof, to the siedlung experience, is an overlooked dimension with modernism; that the group of houses is a settlement of the community. It’s not so much about the aesthetic of the buildings.

NB: There’s a degree of implicit sharing. Groups of things within them…

KH: Well it goes back to your comments of making and using, in the sense that in the modernist idea of a house or a group of houses, its not so much about the aesthetic, it’s about the way buildings are used, that you can use all of the building, and that by walking on it you’re using it, and you’re in a sense connected with the people around you, in the way that you use it. Which is more about a way of life than a ‘style’, and that’s something which people constantly miss in the sense of what these buildings are trying to do. And I think in a funny sort of way you capture it quite strongly, especially with the ground plane, that issue about the ground plane around the carport.

It is quite plausible to think that while we have been consciously studying and documenting various found conditions and situations that came to influence the Elwood House design, we were also perhaps unconsciously remembering and looking for such ideal spaces or modernity as the shared ground plane and social roof terrace. However I think that coming about it this way (through a sense of social interaction and private-public interface) leads to a very different result than if we had started out explicitly aiming at a study of the modern housing tradition.

NB: It really is all about this existing (internal) stair. The existing stair is historically quite interesting, because it was originally a one-roomed building, then they added on a second storey, and then they turned it into a rooming-house and added on this external...
stair and there were all these extra bathrooms and kitchens.

KH: Before the client bought it?

NB: Yes, and then when they bought it they had to
reinstall the internal stair because there was no
internal stair, there was only an external one. So one
of the first things that Carey [Lyon] did was renovate
this staircase and put a new balustrade in. And then
our project is all about working off the half-laudings
of that stair, in order to get three levels rather than
two in the re-creation. When you pop out at the
upper level to go up to the roof terrace, it’s only half
a flight of stairs away, so everything’s very close, but
also separated.

KH: To me, looking at some of the images from the roof
terrace, I could see a whole cluster of houses built
on this principle and creating a sense of communal
space (16).

NB: That’s if the planning laws would allow it... we could
only do this because we’re on the edge of an abyss.

KH: Yes that’s right. I mean similar things were done
in the 70s with cluster house experiments, and in
Canberra as well. In Canberra you have sometimes
these kinds of conditions, these anomalous
conditions. Canberra really is the land of the
easement.

NB: Yes, that’s right. There are easements everywhere.
This easement here is also quite an important public
space; on the one hand the space is ‘left over’
literally, it’s pretty nondescript. But on the other hand
the canal is transformed and has become a ‘thing’
now, whereas it was a ‘nothing’ before. It’s still got
that strange quality of being important and civic but
also not really a front-door space, which a bit like
the quality of the side boundary in general. It’s
pretty strange, you can see there the cutting visually
of the corner through to the school. There are kids that
come out of the high school and smoke, come out for a
fag under here.

KH: I guess it relates to Tony Garnier as well? The Cite
Industrielle, with the stairs up to the roof and the
open ground plane... [Tony Garnier, Residential
Quarter, Cite Industrielle, 1904 (17)]

NB: There is this strange but amazing thing where you
are in the trees, you have the very formal trees of
Shelley Street which is one of the strongest avenues
around, it’s really dramatic, and you are right at
the end of the line of deciduous trees, and then
you have the she-oaks and native vegetation of the
canal. So even in a landscape sense up there, you
look in one direction and it is all autumn leaves and
in the other direction it’s Australian she-oaks. You’re
at the intersection, in this merged treetop zone.

KH: The other thing that strikes me too is that this
property has a really tiny backyard compared to
these other properties. So there is a really strong
logic in the way that you are appropriating a section
of the canal reserve, because this property doesn’t
really have a backyard. Its backyard is like a tenth
of the neighbouring properties ones. It is almost
abrupt.

NB: But it still has the same front yard. There is
no change in that one. For a while they had a
trampoline while the kids were growing up, it was
quite a big one. It couldn’t fit in the backyard so
they put it in the front yard which is sort of a weird
thing having a trampoline in the front yard. And it
got chucked into the canal on a Friday night, some kids
came along and picked it up and it got thrown in the

and they had to call people to get it out. There is a
very strong sense of having a roof terrace as sort
of a ‘compensation’ for the fact that you don’t have
much private space, but on the other hand, you
may have very little (space) but this is also a positive
thing, because you have this incredible vista. So the
roof terrace solved both of those things. It embraced
the scale of what was there but also provided
compensation for the lack of real space. And the
same with dissolving the side boundary with gates,
and there are little windows in the fence that open
up and look out to the canal. You can open that gate
and stick some chairs out here you know, have a
barbecue, you can literally use it... like people use
nature strips for cars.

KH: and the rock... at least someone can’t come in and
move that, unlike the trampoline.

NB: Well that is to stop this old guy that drives up around
that corner: it’s a bollard. I guess in this way we
were trying to think about these urban issues, I
think you would call them, or suburban issues - as
well as the house, which is a singular thing. The
idea of the domestic realm, the family unit, or the
household - and the community, and those things
as a relationship. Probably because this house is,
like those Weissenhof ones, there is always that
space (16).

NB: The primary thing about this project was that its
scale was kind of given: I mean there was a town
planning envelope, and so on. We could have gone
bigger, perhaps, if we had gone to VCAT [Victorian
Civil and Administrative Tribunal], but it was decided
that it wanted to be just the maximum possible
within the rules, as opposed to breaking the rules,
like the big development at the other end of Kerr
Street [KNX development, originally by architect
Ivan Rijavec (18)], which broke all the rules but still
got a permit. Here there is a front building: a street
building/terrace building and then a back building that
is more like a three-dimensional thing which works with
the language of these can mechanic shed type factories. The
separation of those two buildings made a space.

ON CONTINUITY...

NB: The project [Flitzy House] is quite strange
because we did these drawings so long ago; we
worked on it at about the same time as we were
doing Somers House 2003-2004) and its been going
for seven years! It’s meant to be one of those fast-
track developments but it’s the opposite. But that’s
kind of good. These decisions we made such a long
time ago suddenly come back and we’ve almost
forgotten the reason we made them.

KH: It is a good test, in a sense. If it has a logic
that speaks for itself, then the decision-making
process can evaporate but you still have the logic
presumably embedded in it.
NB: Yes, but the brief of new bathroom, new kitchen, rearrange the spaces at the back, open it up to the garden and get a bit more natural light – that is absolutely typical.

KH: In the sense that most architects deal with this by just leaving the historic fabric alone and then doing some sort of wacky little box or something.

NB: I have always had a problem with that Burra Charter idea that new work should be distinctly different from the old, as a conservation principle: so when someone comes along in one hundred years’ time, they know who did what and they can (presumably) demolish the new bit and keep the old bit – something like that.

KH: You’re almost inverting that by saying, actually what we want to do is not... there is a great line in a Godard film called Breathless, where the heroine says to the guy, she says, “I don’t want to begin again, I just want to continue”. Maybe that’s what you think is good.

NB: I think that, definitely, we don’t want to have this situation where there is this beautifully restored old bit, whether be it the next door building, or the bit we’re adding to, and then this kind of new modern: ‘this is what a generous developer might have done, with some really old site divisions and back-to-back workers cottages down the back.’

KH: Is this as a single-storey model?

NB: No, this was just an analysis of how one might have approached the idea with the nineteenth-century; if this block had been given and you had to put a number of dwellings on it. Our brief was seven or eight, but we got seven. How would you have done it in the past? Maybe you would have ended up with something like this, which had some more expensive ones in the front, three at the front and then a service lane with four little miniscule ones at the back. You might get that at the back of Collingwood, or somewhere, with a laneway entrance, or in North Melbourne.

So here we went through this process of subdivision (22). This would be done in Parkville or somewhere, and this would be in Fitzroy. This one got us eight dwellings, just back to back, but we thought that’s a bit mean, sort of a Liverpool model. But this one was seven, where everyone had an entry from the front. In retrospect, that’s quite interesting. So then we stuck with the idea of having three at the front that were quite generous in width, and four at the back which were a bit cheaper, basically. So you had a front and a back and then there was a geometry put in place.

KH: That’s a very striking shift. The jump from that second image to the third is an astonishing leap. How on earth, did you, like did that just happen? It just seems like an extraordinary thing to generate. Did it just sort of come out?

NB: Well at a really banal level, these apartments are all sold with things like ‘views to the city’. Of course the front ones do, but they are not angled towards it. That idea was just appropriated by us, as an excuse for trying to find a way in which this building could have an independence from the logic of the site. So this is the upper level division, and that the ground level division, which is again, thishoff model of the arcade, with a gate at each end.

KH: Car parking?

NB: Yes, so it’s open to the sky, and there’s a hole in the middle. You look through the gates, so they’re kind of public. For a model, we had taken photos of St Paul’s cathedral, little bit up on Flinders lane, where you look through to Federation Square, or those German meilekaseme, those sort of spaces where you have the hoff courtyard model. Interestingly, this block is quite related to those German ones.

KH: In proportion?

NB: In the literal dimensions of the site.

KH: There’s something incredibly endearing about this as a gesture. It’s endearing because it seems ingenious and sort of almost naïve to actually, like ‘you’re not serious are you?’ And yet, there’s no reason why you can’t make it work. It would never have occurred to me that you could actually use it as an apartment plan.

NB: Well it gets pretty tricky. Here’s the ground floor and the resultant space. There are set-backs and steps for town planning and avoiding overshadowing. The shaping of the courtyard gives everyone views of the street trees. So there is an idea that the back apartments can still share the feeling of Kerr Street, which is quite a luxurious street. And there’s the hole down to the arcade. The rain comes through, which is quite important.

KH: I think what I’m trying to get at is, that it’s interesting the way with your really urban work, (I know this is the only large residential stuff you’ve done so far) but there’s almost the sense that, it is trying to get the big architectural gesture out of a directness about, ok this is what we’re gonna do and we’re just gonna do it. And there’s almost no embarrassment about, well, this is the city works and you’ve got to make it work, and the building has to almost be quite tough.

NB: Is it kind scale, an appropriate scale? What do you mean by that?

KH: I mean doing a building of this scale; suddenly there are all kind of pressures. I mean, you can finesse around with all sorts of edges and bits and pieces but at the end of the day, you’ve got to have that view.

NB: We had to have this thing that’s tough enough to survive the insane process of the development and the finance of this building. Even if we couldn’t control the way things are finished, like you can in a house, the idea of the entrance and the circulation and the planning would remain.

KH: I think that’s sort of what I was getting at, which goes back to that expedient logic of those industrial buildings, in a way.

NB: The result of that is the ground floor is completely worked out in terms of the car logic, turning circles, and entries and whatever.

KH: At the same time, it is that, but there is kind of elegance about the solution. I think that’s what is interesting about your work. Is that you can have a very pragmatic response but there’s a kind of an
elegance in the pragmatism as well. It’s not like a mean pragmatic, developer’s pragmatic.

NB: Generous pragmatism.

KH: Well not so much generous, because there’s not so much to be generous with, but there’s a sort of minimalistic elegance of ‘well, we know we’re not going to be able to do anything but this; so this gesture is going to be all-important.’ It’s almost too much of a judicious choice.

NB: I think it is a choice as opposed to a gesture. It is a gesture, but not like a formal gesture. Then I guess what you might call the delight of the plan is the way in which that logic has to then fit into the next logic.

KH: I wouldn’t call it delight. It’s almost quite violent. But it’s the violence of the city. That’s what interesting about it. You’re kind of saying, you can’t play games in the city, it’s like there’s an on-clad logic by which things are set out. And you just have to negate it.

NB: At the point in which the stair circulation joins things, you have to get up from one system up to the next.

KH: I think it’s more of a sense of astonishment. Like ‘Oh, the stair, well it comes up, oh there it is.’ It really sticks in my mind, we were discussing at one point, should the columns (on the ground floor) be square or round? in this car park because we wanted them to be concrete. And both of them seemed wrong. I remember thinking about it with you and then I can’t remember how we decided to do the octagon... (23,24,25)

KH: I think I mentioned that Auguste Perret had octagon columns. I think, in one of his projects. [On closer inspection Perret’s columns are sometimes faceted, but not octagonal; for example the buildings at Le Havre (1944-54). Octagonal concrete columns were used on the ground floor of the State Library of Victoria, under the doremed reading room, architects Bates Peebles and Smart, 1906-11] The engineer wanted to do round ones, but they’re more expensive than the square ones and neither of them seemed right, the square one was too much like a pilaster or something, and the round one was too commercial. The octagon is just right.

We also had a discussion about what the ground surface should be, whether it should be asphalt... because it was originally going to be terrazzo, it had to be like a car show room to make this thing work, it is like a car park mixed with a luxury apartment lobby. But then we couldn’t afford that and we were taking of all sorts of things right down to roads. It ended up being broken bits of blue stone offcuts of bluestone, so it’s like a footpath, it is the footpath just continuing through.

KH: What’s interesting about your building is it has those two levels of the front and the back. I think that’s really the key to your whole response.

NB: You mean the difference between the front and the back?

KH: Yes, that’s there’s a kind of skyline logic for the back part and a street logic for the front.

NB: They’re practically the same façade but this front one was the one that had to dress up a bit more, because it’s still seen by town planners, by the public and by the development market as the most important one. And it is the pedestrian entry, and the back one is the car entry. It’s really important in the plan. Because there’s this one space that is shared by people and cars, so in the ground floor plan the cars come in and out of this space, and there are bollards at the front... the people come in through the gates, press the button then up the ramp and yet in this space they mix... so you walk through the car space to get to your apartment.

KH: Yes, well it’s very rarely done, in the sense that a car space can be a public space. People very rarely think about that possibility, it’s quite a rich possibility.

NB: There are all those terrible solutions for parking in apartment buildings where there are sort of half-basements, or those apartments where they’re just blank at person level – concrete panels, and then the apartments start two meters off the street.

KH: What’s the problem with the car park because we have made. It is like a bunker.

NB: Oh, the car, the sixty thousand dollar Peugeot down in some concrete bunker.

KH: And often the car is the most expensive asset people have... You don’t want to park your sixty thousand dollar Peugeot down in some concrete bunker.

NB: The client was convinced that the people that would live here would all park cars, so he wanted the garages all to be like a showroom, a car showroom.

KH: Yes, that’s a great idea.

ON WORK AND TEMPORARINESS...

KH: When I see the images now of this project [Lyons office], I think it is almost like you are trying to re-definition the idea of a flout – what you have been asked to do is to create a flout, what you have done has a very different feel to a standard office flout. So I kind of feel like you are trying to rediscover what it means to ‘fit something out’.

NB: Yes, I suppose that’s the question being asked. It wasn’t a total flout, it was about how to arrange a program/ a series of activities in a given space.

KH: What do you mean not a total flout?

NB: Well it’s not like we made every wall and ceiling and floor...

KH: It’s almost not a flout but a ‘fit-in’, in a sense... not a ‘transformation’. You are not transforming it and turning it into an interior.

NB: It is something about the act of making bits of furniture, and making bits of wall, and arranging them in a space – but still it is more than 50% about what is already there.

KH: The act of making it visible/ more visible than it might ordinarily be.... Is that some sort of notion about the inhabitation of the space being a temporary thing?

NB: Yes, well this is an old department store, and there is a sense that the building had been through a lot already, and it will go through a lot in the future. So no matter what we did it was going to be a bit like camping, in relation to the timescale of the building. That was something that we talked about with the clients at the time…

KH: That’s very interesting, because often architectural offices are fitted out almost as an advertisement for the product of what the architects do. Whereas what you are doing here is almost like the opposite of that – when you talk about it being a temporary encampment for the architects, as a place to work, what it is doing more is celebrating their act of work, rather than the product. It is not another product that they have made. It is more like you are celebrating the work that is done in there. The work itself [of Lyons] is something else – that goes on in the
KH: It is not an advertisement for their work as a product. It is an advertisement more for the activity of their work, if you like. I think that fits in with what you were saying before about temporariness – why it should be seen as an encampment.

NB: It is sort of about the act of working in teams. There is a sense of a field of design, and the teams working on different projects grow and shrink. Because of these offices (which interrupt the field) the teams can naturally move around and find spatial pieces within the field.

KH: Does that fit in with the idea of collaboration? Is that another theme, to do with the act of work as a process of collaboration?

NB: Well it is also a process of talking (together)… which is what these little window tables are for in a way. They are for the team members to withdraw to, and talk with each other; a bit like this desk at the end of here, where we are. But also to get away from the computer and the phone, and to work by themselves and talk… to encourage the discussion between team members

KH: Which is very different, because often in the traditional architects office (or the contemporary architects office) there is a very distinct hierarchy between say the directors, who sit in a separate part of the office, or in enclosed small offices, and then the ‘drafting team’, if you like, in the big space. Whereas here what you are suggesting is that the directors actually move into the shared space as well.

NB: Well the directors are placed within it, and some of them work outside in the shared space, but some are in their offices. There is very definitely a sense of continuity between the offices and the field of desks. The desks in the office are different with those outside, even oriented the same way, just with a window between them.

When you enter in, you enter through the bicycle parking. The foyer is this strangely semi-public space, with the idea that things happen in the foyer (like meetings). So you enter straight into the workplace. I suppose in relation to a notion of furniture, it strutted us that the parking of the bicycles was as much the project as the making of a wall. So on one level, the project is orchestrating a plan, so you work out where things happen, in relation to other things. And the other is then what do you design? We spent as much effort on the bike racks and the tables as we did on the enclosures.

KH: But even the act of placing bikes in a certain position… it’s not really about the design of the racks themselves, or a nice piece of detailing… it’s more the sense of placing the objects where they are, isn’t it?

NB: It’s really about the plan, deciding what is before what, or what is adjacent to what.

KH: It’s the intent of the plan as well, the sense that when someone walks in they see all these bikes.

NB: I think the question we are trying to ask is, how do you arrange the activity of something in relation to other people, in a social sense? There are visitors coming in, and there is a divide between the front and the back. So when people come in for a meeting they see certain things going on, and then there are workers in relation to each other, in relation to teams of different projects, but also directors and staff, and then there is the individual sitting at one of these tables in relation to the group, but also in relation to the city – because at those tables you are right looking down over Swanston Street. So there is a city/ individual/ team/ collective/ visitor interface. It is all those kind of relationships that the furniture and the plan – the arrangement of activity through the arrangement of chairs and tables and divisions – makes possible.

KH: But the image of the office is very self-consciously not the image of a corporate office, have there been any problems with clients, who are a bit surprised or puzzled?

NB: According to Lyons clients have been incredibly positive. They have a lot of builder-developer clients and institutional clients, and this sense of it being sort of unfinished or in-process has been responded to a lot. They have hands-on client workshops for up to fifty people in the meeting room/ reception zone, where the plan turns into a small conference centre, using all the meeting spaces and reception/ foyer together.

But apparently the landlords have been complaining… because they can’t rent the next door space because this space looks too unfinished, or something.

KH: I was just wondering, because there is a certain corporate image which is the way it is because people think that is what you have to do, or perhaps it is just the expectation that real-estate agents have?

NB: But there is a sense that with the artworks, there is a deliberate front of house quality as well.

KH: And there is a certain level of finish in the detailing, which shows that it is not just literally thrown together, there is a care in how it is done.

NB: Returning to this idea of celebrating the act of work, as opposed to the products that the architects make…

KH: Because there is nothing in that (your design) that really is anything to do with the kinds of buildings that Lyons are putting out there: in terms of the imagery, or the iconography, or the architectural language that they try to develop.

NB: But it is about the way they work, which is very team-based. The project is really about two things: the site-specificity of this particular building and its qualities, in the city, and the act of doing architectural work.

ON ARCADES IN THE CITY…

KH: Going there [to Fitzroy Apartments] now it is completed, I think that it is interesting that you are much more aware of the ‘guts’ of the building than what is on the street. What is inside/ the interior of the block. You are much more aware of that than the streetscape that it is creating, which is interesting. It is quite the opposite of what these kinds of buildings often try to do.

NB: Well the street façades are really just a cut, and are in black - a negative. Whereas the inner ones have a lot of detail (in the panels) and are reflective, so it bounces light around.

KH: Yes, it is almost like it pulls out the centre of the block into the street. Which in a way also pulls out the typology – and makes you aware of the typology.

NB: … of the two buildings/ two pieces?

KH: Yes, of those towers within, and the way they are extruded out of the block.

NB: I think the interesting thing in retrospect about the arcade is that it erases the distinction between the two buildings. You can’t tell if you are entering an apartment that belongs to the front building or the back building, because the entrances are all treated the same. And the hole becomes quite abstract between them.

KH: That is what I noticed when I went in. I was quite surprised. Because of the (glazed) garage doors you don’t have a sense even that you are in a carpark. It is not at all a carpark. It is actually like some of those old lanes in medieval cities. That sense of a cobblestone… like courtyards, which are paved areas that come off the street. So you almost feel that you are still on the street. It is an urban space, but it is a private space. It is certainly not like a ground-storey carpark in any way.

NB: In this image, for example, you are looking across – from one garage across the arcade to another garage (26).

KH: It is interesting how much that carpark area, or the driveway area, has taken on a whole kind of ambience. It is like there is series of layers, or of readings. To me, that is like trying to find a typology for shared urban space, within a building, that doesn’t fall into either private or public (categories)…

NB: It is sort of mixed private and public in a way

KH: you know it is very much like the old Flanders Way arcade, do you know that one? It is almost like trying to go back to that, it creates that type of image.

NB: There used to be a Chinese restaurant in there… you had to go in, go through the arcade in order to get into the building itself/ above. [Flanders Way, 238 Flinders Lane, Melbourne - now converted into apartments].
NB: By city you mean CBD?

KH: It is a bit similar also to the Nicholas Building, which is still there, I think [Corner Swanston Street and Flinders Lane Melbourne, architect Harry Norris, 1925-26]. And what is important about the language of those arcades, is that they are an interior, but they have a kind of a robust publicness about them, because of the way they are actually made. It is because of the materiality. Often they were paved with stone, and tiled. And there is a kind of robustness about them. They are certainly not like an office foyer [eg. Manchester Unity Arcade, architect Marcus Varcoe, 1927 (27-28)].

NB: On the other hand they are quite delicate – they often have very fine steel-framed windows, and display cases… mirrored display-cases, and decorative terrazzo tiling, and things like that. And what we noticed when we were looking at those arcades in general was that they always had lights on. So that made them an interior in a way. Here [at Kerr st] the lights are on, but at night-time the lights go off. So the lights are for the day, to reduce the contrast between the bright outside and the inside. Then at night those lights go down to minimum, and little lights come on. Because otherwise they are too bright, and they make it seem too much like a carpark. All those arcades, they are all quite elaborately lit: the Block Arcade, or the little decorative arcades. It is very interesting, it is almost as though you have created a Melbourne city typology in Fitzroy.

KH: To me it is about that whole problem of where does an architectural language come from? There are two ways of looking at it. One way is that architectural language is a collection of images, which you build up in a more or less mechanical manner - which is a way a lot of architects seem to approach tectonics and so on. And another way is that architectural language is just a by-product of a certain sensibility; almost like a feeling about how things are put together. So it is not something that you consciously strive for (which I think something that you talk a lot about anyway). You don’t try to create an architectural language. It just comes out – through I suppose having immersed yourself in certain kinds of environments and understanding how they are actually made.

This is true to an extent, in that we have certainly immersed ourselves in the situations and places in which we have built, and learned a lot about the nuances of how things are used and made in particular locations, however the eventual architectural expression and ‘language’ of the buildings is the result of a complex matrix of decisions and a degree of rigour and control over the relative weighting and relationships between things – see particularly section 11: DETAILS.

ON IMMERSION AND EMPATHY...

KH: Within architecture, there is always this question about what makes an architectural language. I think it is quite rare these days. – It is almost that you have the understanding of an environment, whether it is urban or wherever, that comes from a type of deep immersion within that environment – which gives you an understanding that almost can’t be put into words, but it is about how you put things together, about how they are made. The understanding is in the making, it is not a verbal language, it is the language of how things are made. These-days, the tendency in architecture is that architecture has become a very literary thing – all the stuff about theory, it is all about literature, effectively.

NB: …or about images

KH: But even the image fixation is literary as well, because it is all about images which have a certain, are tied to certain theoretical propositions, which are literary, generally.

NB: But if you are talking about a making, it is different, isn’t it. It is a sort of hand-based thing, without getting too romantic about it.

KH: It is also about what Adolf Loos talks about [at the start of his articles ‘Architecture’ (1910)] you know when he says that the peasant makes the roof he doesn’t know what kind of roof, it is just a roof – he makes it. So his understanding is in the making, not in being able to put it into language, or describe it.

NB: But we’re not that, we’re architects

KH: Oh no, he doesn’t have a naturalistic-romantic view about that. He (Loos) is saying that each sphere of human activity has its own rules, if you like. So in a sense he takes it from the more Wittgenstein point of view, that each sphere of human activity has its own rules and its own language, and one works within that sphere with an understanding of the rules, effectively. [see Massimo Cacciaconti, Architecture and Nihilism: on the Philosophy of Modern Architecture. Chapter 11 “Expressionism” pp 150-163]. It is just that there is no over-arching or totalizing language across spheres of activity. So the craft worker, in each sphere of craft there is a set of rules, and it is really the ability to work within different contexts and understand the rules and work within them that is important. There is no totalizing overview, which is what the whole theory thing is about.

NB: Theory is always about trying to find the big meaning or picture, which then other things are subservient to.

KH: I think that Loos is saying that the architect tries to understand the different rules in different spheres. It is not that the architect can be a peasant, or practice in a way that is completely unconscious or intuitive, and forgets about 2000 years of civilization of architecture, but it is more a sense of the ‘deep grammar’, if you like, underlying each of the different practices. For instance, what is the deep grammar in the city of these spaces that you are trying to deal with?

NB: The deep grammar of a space, a thing…

KH: The grammar is the way it is put together. And of course there is a different grammar in each sphere of reality, in each of the places where architecture occurs, whether its urban, semi-urban, rural… there is a different grammar if you like. And it is the sense of trying to grasp the grammar…

As I was listening to this I was thinking that I really agree, but I am also suspicious of the ideology attached to such notions.

NB: Some people would put this as trying to find the ‘appropriate’ way of doing things, in a simplistic sense. ‘How does one build in the country’, or in the city, for example.

KH: Well propriety is an old discourse in architecture that goes back to ancient culture. I mean that’s been turned into a sort of bourgeois thing about what is ‘proper’, but underneath it there is a kind of more raw, basic sense of the idea of the proper, as well.

NB: I think that when you talk about grammar – because perhaps of this linguistic obsession of past times – I think people misunderstand you. What you are talking about isn’t about words, even.

KH: The relation between speech and grammar, for example is very interesting. In order to speak you need a grammar, but just by learning the rules of a language doesn’t enable you to speak. Grammar is something that is never spoken, but is always underlying. It is like a foundation. So the grammar is the unspoken, if you like, within any set of discourses. But it is really what holds everything together. But at the same time the grammar is never
visible, its invisible – that’s the important thing. You know how Cacciari talks about the sense of the invisible? He says that Mies [van der Rohe] is trying to codify and make a very ordered arrangement, not to celebrate what is there, but rather to celebrate what is not there. So the ordering, if you like, safeguards the invisible. [see Cacciari, op cit, “Epilogue”, pp.205-206]

NB: I am interested in what you say about this ‘immersion’ – because if there is some kind of method in this body of work it would be that we are constantly immersing ourselves in things. Whether it is studying the funny buildings in Rainbow, or…

KH: Well it is the same when you go to another country and you immerse yourself in dialects. You go to Rainbow, and you try to understand the dialects of the way things are put together. The different nuances of the way things are spoken, if you like, in an architectural sense. It is that sense of being attuned to different dialects, and having a kind of, not familiarity, but being versed in them. So that is what I see in your work, is that sense of the different dialects.

NB: How even though there might be the same type of building, in a very basic kind of 1:100 way, in both Rainbow and in Fitzroy, the grammar, or the nuanced way, of doing buildings in Rainbow and in Fitzroy is so totally different.

KH: As different as talking to somebody in a pub in Rainbow [in the Mallee] would be different to talking to someone at the Rose Hotel in Fitzroy, or a bar in Flinders Lane [in central Melbourne].

NB: But the basic buildings and sites are remarkably similar. If you look at an aerial photograph they are almost identical. Between Northcote [an inner Melbourne suburb] and a country town, there is almost no difference. But it is in the nuance or sensibility that there is a real difference. The only way of understanding this, I think, is to be there, to see how things are put together and to think about why this is the case. I mean there is a certain expediency in the way things are done in the country – the easiest or quickest thing to do in some cases, but that gives it a certain appearance: a certain easiness or laconic quality. But you would never call an arcade in the city, for example, ‘laconic’.

KH: It is that sense of, again, of what is proper; how does one behave in different environments.

NB: Yes, how does one behave…

KH: Actually, in antiquity there was an art of rhetoric, which is when you were in certain company you would speak in a certain way, but you would never speak that way with other kinds of people… which of course has gone now.

NB: That reminds me of the discussion by Flores+Prats in their text, where they talk of a “Zelig” attitude … They talk about this sort of ‘extreme empathy’.

KH: That is quite a good term.

NB: It is different to ‘soft’ empathy, I think. It is not just trying to blend in or be invisible.

KH: No, it is not contextualism. It is not the town planners’ rhetoric.

…the sense of training is good [in Flores+Prats text], training the eye, training the public’s eye to read reality. When they say “accepts the outside reality as a learning field…” is probably the interesting thing. It is an anti-utopian thing too; it is against the modernist notion that the architectural project transforms reality and creates a new world. It is very much the antithesis of that.

NB: I thought it was interesting when they say that even the act of building is an act of observation, which becomes a training of how to then observe, in a way, so it is a cyclical thing between the immersion, in a way of doing things, along the canal in this instance, and then the doing of something in that environment becomes then part of the environment, so it adds back into it. And you are pointing something out by doing it that wasn’t there before…

KH: …rather than, the predominant thing at the moment in architecture, which is the gesture. The gesture is something which almost explodes reality. But what you are trying to do is stitch reality back into itself.

NB: Well the gesture is something that we have talked about in terms of explicitly trying to ‘repress’ or to stop – by, focusing on something like in this case a fence, which has a form of just following the boundary, because that’s what fences do: they follow the boundary, whatever shape it is…