Bruegelage
Interrogations into nine concurrent creative practices

Jan van Schaik
March 2015
RMIT University

The Wedding Dance, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1566. Oil on panel, 119.4cm x 157.5cm
Museum Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit Michigan

Image: The Wedding Dance, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1566. Oil on panel, 119.4cm x 157.5cm. Museum Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit Michigan

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Jan van Schaik
Reflective Practice PhD
RMIT University
2015
Bruegelage
*Interrogations into Concurrent creative practices*

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Architecture and Design.

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March 2015
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March 2015
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**Acknowledgements**

**Supervisors**
Richard Blythe, Marcelo Stamm.

**Mentors**
Esther Anatolitis, Paul Carter, Paul Minifie, Leon van Schaik.

**Collaborators**

**Project Clients**
The Alice Smith School, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Art Gallery of South Australia, Bob Weis, Cafe Bourgeois, City of Melbourne, Donata Carrazza, Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces, Helen Vivian, Hero Apartments Owners Corporation, Lembaga Getah Malaysia, Leon van Schaik, Melbourne Water, Ross Lake, RMIT University, Stefano de Pieri, Sugar Station

**Employers**
Ashton Raggatt McDougall, Bates Smart McCutcheon, Field Consultants, NHArchitcture, Minifie Nixon, MvS Architects, RMIT University.

**MvS Architects Company Directors**
Paul Minifie, Jan van Schaik.

**MvS Architects employees**

**Research Assistants**
Raj Andagare, Bo Chu, John Doyle, Simon Glaseter, Helen Grogan, Mansing Hsu, John Kachami, Wilson Leung, Dan Schulz, Helen Walter, Ben Wilson.

**Editing and Proofing**
Suzannah Vicotira Beatrice Henty, Timothy Johannessen, Cath Stutterheim.

**Exhibition Team**

**Graphic Design**
Wiriyak Suvanmani, Keir Vaughan.

**Financial Support**
This research has been generously supported by RMIT School of Architecture and Design through the School Research Committee Funds.
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Andrew Curtis: page 50
Andy O’Brien: page 173
Angelica Mesiti: page 120
Ashton Raggatt McDougall: pages 46, 127, 256
Australia Zoo: page 156
Cassandra Fahey: page 31
Darren Sylvester: page 121
David Noonan: pages 119, 123
Derek Swalwell: page 47
Eliza Hutchison: pages 115-116, 123
Fiona Abicare: pages 80-83, 160, 169
Felice Varini: page 97
Fender Katsalidis: page 78
Graeme Gunn: page 24
Harry Brundage: page 286
Hiroshi Sugimoto: page 95
H. Lin Ho: page 217
Icon Film Distribution: page 294
Jessica Drenk: page 173
Justene Williams: pages 115, 119, 122
John Gollings: page 288
Leon van Schalk: page 21
Lyons: page 96
Patricia Brassington: pages 108, 111-113
Paul Knight: pages 118, 121
Peter Bennetts: pages 23, 38, 40, 44-45, 51, 84-91, 134, 136-137, 142-151, 186-189, 287, 296-301, 303
Peter Corrigan: page 39
Rob McLeish: page 111
Stefano de Pieri: pages 103, 195
Stephen Savage: page 311
Sunraysia Daily: page 197
Sylvia Nickerson: page 286
The Frac Center: page 26
The State Library of Victoria: page 77
Wake in Fright Trust: page 193
William Honkian: page 155
Wolfgang Sievers: pages 77, 272
An Introduction to Reflective-Practice Based Research

My practice is one of multiple layers, reflections on which form the basis of this PhD research. My practice has a venturous layer. The projects that I undertake are typically risky and eclectic. Methodological experiments are constantly being conducted into how I find clients and collaborators; how projects come about; which design processes are used; and what influences these design processes accept.

These experiments are grounded within the community context in which I practice. This community context is the next layer, which is unusual because I define it as being populated by more than people. It includes: objects; past projects of my own; my immediate collaborators; a small number of peers, with whom I am in regular contact with; a large diaspora of peers who my knowledge of creates a base for my work; throwback peers who I have never met, many of whom are long since deceased; and members that I have termed wildcards, who can become part of this community at random and without notice.

There is an implicit layer of discovery embedded in my work. This research makes explicit these discoveries through a process of reflection; these reflections are then documented, and in turn, re-introduced into the work.
Presentation panels from my first, second, third and fourth Practice Research Symposia (formerly known as Graduate Research Conferences)
Images by Ann van Schaij
While there is a commercial element to my practice, it is the overlaying of these layers of reflection which distinguishes my practice from commercial and/or venturous practice, which does not elevate itself to the point of research by making explicit its own discoveries.

This research is part of a program in which many practitioners reflect on the processes of design within their own practices, and articulate the knowledge they discover in a written and visual document and a presented exhibition. This process takes a number of years, and is conducted alongside the everyday commercial functioning of their practices. Ideally, during the period of the research, the knowledge gained through reflection is fed back into the practice and changes the nature of it. This type of knowledge also has the potential to further understanding of architectural practice in general.

The process involves reflecting on the practice while it is conducted. These reflections are then presented in visual and verbal form twice a year to a panel which includes first and second supervisors, other invited panellists and an audience of peers. These presentations take place at what are called Practice Research Symposia (PRS). Each PRS takes place over a three-day weekend, and includes presentations from all candidates enrolled in the program. On these same weekends, candidates being examined present their exhibitions to panels of invited external examiners. These presentations are open to the public. Every year there are two Practice Research Symposia conducted in Melbourne, Barcelona, Ghent, and Ho Chi Minh City each.

Over the course of this research, I took part in seven Practice Research Symposia, five of which took place in Melbourne, and two in Ghent. I took part in and presented an exhibition at the PRS in Melbourne in June 2015 as a candidate for examination.

At the first PRS I presented a comprehensive and unedited audit of a tangled multitude of types of practices, types of collaborations and types of projects. Underpinning these was a
myriad of fascinations, lineages and references, all bubbling up from equally complex communities in and around which my practice is located. The work arising from this was eclectic in nature, and each project was in a category all of its own. See Research Diagram on the first page of the introduction.

This research has provided a structure for reflecting on and explicating my methods of practice, motivations, tendencies and my position in the broader context of the theory and practice of architecture that I had not been aware of prior to undertaking the present research.

Through interacting with the design community that has developed around these practice research symposia, as well as the panel and audience at my first presentation, it became clear that rather than shaping my practice in a neat and tidy form, the purpose of this research would be to reflect on the complex, eclectic and intertwined nature of my practice as it exists, and to explicate the tacit knowledge about creativity and design that lie within it. This process of reflecting and making explicit the findings arising will demonstrate that my practice is valuable in itself in research terms, inasmuch as it presents a deepened understanding of my practice, arrived at using a reflective practice, approach.

Through this process a specific contribution to knowledge, relevant to my practice peers and disciplinary realm, is established.

This document is structured in order to: articulate my reflections on the community within which I practice; describe the research methods used and the discoveries made in this thesis in an essay; record my reflections on the projects of my practice on a project-by-project basis; and then make explicit the discoveries I have made from overlaying these layers of reflection.

To achieve this, I have documented the process of reflection on a project-by-project basis. In my practice I have produced close to fifty projects. Of these, projects representing eleven different types were ultimately chosen so as to give a comprehensive view of my practice. The process of deciding which projects to choose was undertaken over the period of the research, and the list was refined to include the projects in...
which reflection and findings gave rise to the greatest contribution to knowledge. These project sections were written first, and over a long period of time. A reader interested in chronological accuracy should read the project sections first; the community of practice section second; thirdly the essay; then the exhibition section; and finally; the conclusion. Findings from the reflections into these projects are documented in this introduction, the community of practice section, the essay and the conclusion.

The introduction introduces the methods of this research, and sets out how this document will unpack them. It also states how this document will record the reflections into practice, and how it will make explicit what this research has discovered and how this contributes to the knowledge of the practice and theory of creative practice and architecture.

The community of practice section defines the disciplinary realm in which I operate, differentiating my practice from that of my nearest colleagues, and carves out the specific ground of my contribution. I look at their techniques, urges and fascinations, and outline how, even though my practice is not quite the same, I am operating in a similar area of architectural endeavour.

The essay explains the specific operations of my practice, describing the research methods that I have used, and outlines discoveries that have been made while referencing specific project examples extracted from the selected projects.

The conclusion and the section on the exhibition summarise the discoveries and contributions to knowledge that this research makes, and outline how this has positioned my practice in an on-going state being able to produce research through experimentation, reflection and publication.

Prior to undertaking this reflective practice research, I practiced in a roundabout, complex, tangled and non-linear way. I was unable to describe myself as the author of any of the works I produced, and found myself at pains to conceal both this eclectic mess and this sense of lack of authorship from collaborators and clients. I believed my practice to be impoverished as a result of these tendencies—tendencies that I seemed unable to escape.

In conducting this research, I have discovered that these tendencies are in fact crucial to the success of my practice, the venturous content in the work, and the creative processes that generate them.

In the conclusion I have outlined how, having reached the end of this reflective research process, I still practice in a similar way, but am now aware of, and have greater control over, the tangled set of interrelated, yet often unrelated elements that make up my practice. I have recorded how the findings of this research give new insight into the value of practicing in this way, while also raising issues about attribution and authorship. Finally, I have outlined how this state of reflection, discovery, operating in, and contributing to a defined community, and the subsequent explicit articulation of discoveries has positioned my practice in a state where it is constantly generating new research.
From my investigations, I have learned that the community in which my practices exist is a complex network that has come into being as a result of decisions that I have made, and this is a network that I am constantly growing and pruning. Also, in opposition to the typical model where the creative author is understood as being placed at the apex of a range of influences and mentors, my hierarchical position in my community of practice is constantly changing and is intertwined with the communities of practice of others in a tangled knot of multiple sets of overlapping Venn diagrams. Through my reflections, I have untangled this intertwined knot of communities for the purposes of describing its elements; but I have learned that this very tangled nature is itself crucial to the practice, and is best left preserved, or even better, tangled further.

There are many elements within this network. To describe them, I have grouped them into categories of the personal, the geographic, the intellectual, heroes, educators, peers and wildcards—and some points fall into more than one category. To some extent, this section overlaps with the acknowledgements section, where there is a full list of all the people I have collaborated with, and those who have assisted me in various ways.

An Orchestrated Community of Practice

I have described how I relate to my community of practice as a ‘relationship’. This relationship is formed around the intent of the works to do something, to be effective, to have agency beyond a simple architectural tectonic. All the members of my community of practice do this in their own ways, and it is in this shared intention that a disciplinary boundary is described—one to which I wish to contribute through my own work, and one which, while it might share a relationship with these other works, also endeavours to find its own specific agency.

a) The Purely Personal

In the personal category, we find all the spaces I’ve experienced that I have unconsciously kept a memory.
My relationship to the work of Cath Stutterheim, my mother, herself an illustrator and a landscape architect, can also be seen in this same way.

In this category I also place my relationship to the work of Paul Minifie, whose tenure as a friend, tutor and employer pre-dates our roles as co-directors of MvS Architects. Evidence of the interaction between his work and mine can be seen, for example, in the design of the entry portico of Wattle Avenue House and the façade of The Edithvale Seaford Wetlands Discovery Centre, and can be read about in the project sections of the same names.

b) The Tyranny of Geography

In the geographical category we find a relationship between my practice and the architectural community of Melbourne in which my practice is located. When I was a teenager, my parents decided to move to Australia—a decision in which I had no agency. However, once I was of the age where one has agency, I found myself drawn to the great educational institutions, architectural powerhouses and cultures of the northern hemisphere, judging the antipodes to be lacking in substance and promise. Ultimately, however, I decided that it would be more empowering to make the place I was in into the place I wanted it to be, rather than go to some place I wanted to be in and be shaped by it. The point of articulating this in the context of understanding my community of practice is to outline that the geographical location of my practice has been orchestrated, rather than adopted. This fascination with forming the world around me and finding ways to give others agency in the built environments they inhabit can be traced through my work.

This interest in having an effect in the world around me has been a motivating factor in the desire to have my own practice; it has also influenced the manner in which I have invented projects, such as my work in Mildura and Kuala Lumpur, and the projects Scandinavian Freestyle and 59a Bourke Street. More interestingly, it has fuelled my methods of working and the nature of the projects arising from these techniques.

The desire to reference in an implicit manner, as I outline in the essay, comes from a desire to generate a haunting sense of familiarity for the occupiers and audiences of my work. To get a better sense of what I mean by ‘a haunting sense of familiarity’, consider it analogous to the way that the memory of something is inscribed in my mind, in the manner written about by Leon van Schaik in Spatial Intelligence. Evidence of this in my work can be seen, for example, in the design of Wattle Avenue House, where the initial inspiration to base the design around a corridor room came from my memory of a house I lived in as a child, and which Leon van Schaik himself designed. We also find the influence of Johan van Schaik, my grandfather, also an architect and an artist, and Mary Elizabeth Stutterheim, my grandmother and a botanical artist. My memories of drawing with them, has informed, for example, the two-dimensional graphic content of OverLogo and Café Bourgeois. These memories have also informed my method of working whereby something is designed to look like it works to enable a provisional solution for part of a design problem, which you can read about in the section on Practicing in Kuala Lumpur and Qinhuangdao.

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2 Stutterheim Anderson Associates are landscape architects based in Melbourne.
Bruegelage An Orchestrated Community of Practice

In Lyon, Carey. “Towards a Brand New City.” In Transfiguring The Ordinary, A Brand New City”. In Lyon, Carey. “Towards a Brand New City.” In Transfiguring The Ordinary, A Brand New City”.

This desire to create a ‘stickiness’ of things that allows an audience to feel familiar with these things without knowing why, so that this audience might feel that what I have designed belongs to them, or that they belong in a space which they find themselves occupying, can be traced back to the geographical displacement described above.

In the geographical setting of Melbourne, I have been exposed to the architecture of Roy Grounds, Graeme Gunn, Kevin Borland, Edmond & Corrigan, Lyons, Ashton Raggatt McDouggall and McBride Charles Ryan. The relationship between my work and theirs can be seen in a number of projects. Roy Grounds’ obsession with courtyards placed inside monumental forms can be seen in the courtyard of Wattle Avenue House. The formal subtraction of the entry portico of this same design can be traced back to the entry of Ashton Raggatt McDouggall’s Storey Hall and the subtraction operations of The National Museum of Australia in Canberra; and these can in turn be traced back to the work of Paul Minifie, who contributed to the design of both while in Ashton Raggatt McDouggall’s employment. The ‘pixel technique’ of Overlogo can be traced back to Howard Raggatt’s masters research project, and the thinness of its architectural surface can be traced back to Carey Lyon’s views about contemporary architecture being limited to a depth of 300mm. When composing the grey brutalist mass of The Edithvale Seaford Wetlands Discovery Centre and the administration buildings and parents’ centre of the Alice Smith School in Kuala Lumpur, the muscular raw off-form concrete forms of Graeme Gunn’s Plumber’s Union Building in Melbourne, and the toy-like formalism of Kevin Bolrand’s Clyde Cameron Training College in Albury Wodonga were playing in my mind. The apartment buildings, schools and houses of McBride Charles Ryan, such as their Dallas Brooks Community Primary School, or their Fitzroy High School, fill me with a childish envy, where I wish that I’d thought to do what they did first. There is a relationship between where their work sits in my mind’s eye and what I imagine I’d like every project of mine to be before any of them begins to evolve.

The geographic setting of Melbourne is also the site for rich architectural debate where opposing views are expressed through the architectural design of the buildings of the city—for example, where buildings explicitly reference each other, like Ashton Raggatt McDouggall’s Storey Hall referencing Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahoney’s Capitol Theatre. In Melbourne, there are many other architectural firms taking part in this debate whose work has a less explicit relationship with mine than those stated above. Yet the fact that the debate includes so many of Melbourne’s architectural practices; that the view that all ideas are contestable is so widely held; and that each member of a debate only holds their position by virtue of their ability to articulate and argue for it, is an integral part of the architectural culture of Melbourne – and my work is sited within this architectural culture. Instances of this can be seen in the way that the designs for the shops and kiosks of the Sugar Station Confectionery Chain came into existence as a result of taking the position that the kiosk designs should be integral to a very particular architectural language. You can read about this in the project

4 Steven Wright is a US comedian, born in 1955.
5 Architects practicing in Melbourne, past and present.
10 Borland, Kevin. “Projects In The Albury-Wodonga Area”. In Arch. vol. 6, no. 4, 13-31
13 Burley Griffin & Mahoney. The Capitol Theatre. Melbourne: 1924
section of the same name, and also about how I learned, through failure, that when a position is not stated, the work collapses through an excess of compromise to the agendas of others—in the case of this project: Westfield design managers.

c) Intellectual Territory

In the intellectual category, we find a relationship between my design for OverLogo and the writing of Gottfried Semper, who argued that architecture originated in an urge to dance and decorate, from an urge to celebrate and rather than a purely utilitarian need for shelter from the elements. The architecture of a cave, for example, is not in the monumental form of the rock towering overhead, but in the paintings on its walls. There is a relationship between my design for Table Ray and the embracing of the eclectic and the kitsch in Ian McDougall’s Masters project, The Autistic Ogler. There is a relationship between the design process of the panels of The Edithvale Seaford Wetlands Discovery Centre and the work of Lars Spuybrook and Jonah Lehrer, who both write about the search for uncomfortable feelings as a sign that finding new beauty has been discovered.

In the writings of Karl Popper, I find the liberating concept of provisional knowledge, without which it would not be possible to design at all. And in the project section Practicing in Kuala Lumpur and Qinhuangdao, I write about observing a design process called fake-it-till-you-make it, which empowers the designer to understand something as ‘resolved’ to the point that it needs to be, until such a time as it needs to be understood as ‘not resolved enough.’

Inspired by Nikos Papastergiadis and Kwame Anthony Appiah’s writings on cosmopolitanism, I have built tools of collaboration which allow, through language, for disparate and divergent interests between architects and clients (or one architect and another) to become those works that I have learned of from afar, be it through word of mouth, texts or images. Separated from my practices through time, geography or fame, these are works or approaches that have stalked me through my subconscious and haunted my consciousness. There exists a relationship between the work of FAT and Venturi Scott-Brown in the pop interior of Café Bourgeois and Table Ray, just as there is in the orange undercroft of The Edithvale Seaford Wetlands Discovery Centre. When designing OverLogo, the phenomenology of mass repetition depicted in Andreas Gursky’s work heightened my interest in making a work from seven thousand play-pen spheres. In the same project, the game of ‘incorrectly’ scaling the tram ticket to re-contextualise the city around it was consciously and obviously built from observations of the work of Claes Oldenburg.

When working, for example, with Paul Minifie and Jessica In on the design of The Edithvale Seaford Wetlands Discovery Centre panels, we discussed, and pursued the digital experiments of Lars Spuybrook’s Soft Office and the analogue experiments of Frei Otto on which Spuybrook’s were based. Otto’s interest...
Wattle Avenue House is a small residential extension into which a graphic wall, a monumental lean-to, a formally dynamic entry portico, a Raymon Loewy-esque kitchen bench and a hotel bedroom are all crammed. That it would be possible, or even desirable, to cram so many ideas into one small project is related to my interest in the work of Frank Furness, particularly the now-demolished National Bank of the Republic in Philadelphia, in which the architectural language of grand buildings are crammed into one small façade.

e) Fields of Learning

In the category of education are those people that I have learned from directly. It includes mentors, tutors and supervisors, but also my employees and my students. For instance, from Ian McDougall, Peter Bickle and Neil Masterton, to whom I was apprenticed at Ashton Raggatt McDougall, I learned to take humour in architecture seriously. This can be seen in the transformation of the Sydney Opera House into an orange squeezer in Mildura (which you can read about in The Keys to Mildura project section), and in the pun on the ‘bird’s mouth’ window at the Edichvile Seaford Wetlands Discovery Centre (so named after a type of woodwork, or stone joint, but also because birds can be viewed through the window).

From Richard Blythe I learned the nomenclature ‘ticklish’ to describe the acts of deliberately misplacing, misnaming or miss-scaling things (such as tram tickets in OverLogo) or birthing rails in Three Exhibitions to prick an audience’s consciousness. Similar research is being conducted by others in the same program; for example, Arnaud Hendrickx’s and his Too Big Beam and the theory of displacement. From Paul Carter and Callum Fraser I learned that, if the story you tell is compelling enough, something can exist just because you say it does, and my practicing of this skill can be seen in Scandinavian Freestyle and 5th Bourke Street. I talk about its limits in the project section Practicing in Kuala Lumpur and Qinhuangdao. From Peter Brew I learned, and am still learning, that in a design process banal action is liberating - something that I have to remind myself every time I get stuck. This was crucial in breaking through the grid-lock that Lou Weiss and I ended up in on the design of OverLogo. From Howard Raggatt I learned that post-rationalisation is not a dirty word the empowering effect of this can be seen in the Practicing in Kuala Lumpur and Qinhuangdao project section.

From Marcelo Stamm, in his practice research seminars and under his ongoing supervision, I learned that the eclectic nature of my practices was something to be celebrated and understood, not ironed out, and this developed into a formative relationship around the philosophy of creativity, the results of which underpin this entire research project, and which can be seen...
specifically in the project sections on *The Edithvale Seaford Wetlands Discovery Centre, Wattle Avenue House*, and *The Keys to Mildura*. Thinking back to an early co-teaching experience with Pia Ednie-Brown, I recall being frustrated by her tendency to find anything any student proposed worthy of interest and discussion, while I agitated instead for a more didactic discussion. On reflection, I now understand that my own practice has become rooted in a celebration of a plethora of ideas, positions and things, as is evidenced by my wilful collecting of root objects from an endless array of sources. From Leon van Schaik I learned that spatial intelligence is in everyone, and this has changed the way that I interact with my clients and their clients and constituents. A failure to appreciate this led to one particularly spectacular disaster, which you can read about in the project section on *Café Bourgeois*. An attempt to have a city develop a spatial sense of itself can be read about in the project section *The Keys to Mildura*.  

**A Jury of Peers**

My relationship with my peers informs my work through discussion, debate, disagreement, observation, learning, competitiveness and envy. These are very important fuels for our creative engines, and mutually so. For example, in his PhD research, Roland Snoek quotes me writing about his work, and now I am in turn writing about him writing about me writing about him. The piece in question critiqued his approach to emergent design and the ‘stopping problem’ where the creator is not sure what comes next. This critique ultimately informed the design of *The Edithvale Seaford Wetlands Discovery Centre*.  

The work of iPartnership, with whom MVs Architects has collaborated, tests my ability to articulate the nature of my own design approach, as the two practices operate from quite different design ideologies. The contestations about how to go about, and how to describe, design that occur between the two practices are ultimately highly productive, as they were in the design of *Ov Logo* with Lou Weis. Details of the debates with iPartnership over the language of design, and the outcomes they deliver, can be read about in the project section *Practicing in Kuala Lumpur and Qinhuangdao*.  

Mathew Bird and Cassandra Fahy, with whom I studied at RMIT University, engage in design approaches that I enjoy. From the success of the experiments they conduct in their practices, I enjoy a sense of credit by association alone. They both produce eclectic and inventive work which is rich in reference and dexterous in composition. Fiona Abicare, whose work adorns the walls of the offices of MVs Architects, and Lou Weis both of whom I have collaborated with, now have a successful design company and fine arts practice respectively. Knowing that they are working beside me, even though we are not in regular conversation, makes for a palpable sense of community. Also contributing to this sense of community in a similar way are the practices of Elenberg Fraser, Thomas Heatherwick and running a small design practice of her own has, Claire Scorpo, Nicholas Hubicki and Anna Nervegna and Toby Reed (the latter two were also influential lecturers of mine during my undergraduate studies). This influence between peers extends to students and past employees of MVs Architects who are now running their own practices or working for others. Jessica In, now working for Thomas Heatherwick and running a small design practice of her own has, has featured her work on *The Edithvale Seaford Wetlands Discovery Centre* on her own website. Others include Nicole Tang (now working for Cecil Balmond) and Sam Rice (now working for March Studios, whose directors met while in France studying in a group workshop
convened by myself, Paul Minifie, Elodie Nourigat and Hitoshi Abe, Tim Schord, both an ex-employee and a student, is now a lecturer at Monash University and director of the practice Mesne, and Farzin Loth-Jam is the 2013-2014 Sanders Fellow at the University of Michigan, Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning. There are many more and, while this list runs the risk of reading like a claim to success through association, or name dropping, the sense that members of this design diaspora are out there engaged in venturous practice, conducting research and creating their own agency through their work, describes a complex and intertwined field of authorship and knowledge generation, without which the type of practice that I and they conduct would not be possible.

I have observed what I have termed a ‘multi-dimensional peer proximity field’ I use this term to describe how some peers have a strong influence on me, while others have a faint influence. If those that have a faint influence are enough in number their collective influence may add up to a strong one. There are many combinations of this, making it necessary to describe it as a field. Some peers are singular and very close, such as someone collaborating with me on a design, or the other director of MvS Architects. One of these might have a direct impact on the design process in real time by, for example, reaching over the table we’re working together at, and adding to a drawing that we’re working on. Others might be far away in time or geography, but their sheer number means their influence is felt. I call this the wireless component of my practice community, and I will explore the implications that this has for new knowledge in the understanding of creative practice in the conclusion.

And then there are individuals, or works, which are distant in geography and time—people even long since dead, or works now demolished. These are the genetic throwback members of my design community, one example being Frank Furness, whose designs were particularly eclectic themselves. They are similar to haunting heroes, but unlike those, they join this community of practice in an unexpected and unpredictable way, now outlined in the following sub-section.

g) Wildcards

In the wildcards category are elements that enter my community of practice completely at random. They are plucked from the ether because they are of use, but they do not come out of a clear lineage of ideas, from a known group of peers, or a body of knowledge. These wildcards can throw a design process in a whole new direction without warning. Typically, fascinations lead to urges to act, and urges lead to fascinations. Every
practitioner has a series of urges and fascinations. Each of the projects I produce is quite different from the next, and one of the reasons for this is that the fascinations and urges that I have are often being interrupted by *wildcards*. This helps the practice avoid being branded by its fascinations and urges, and it is why MvS Architects does not have a ‘house style’, like that visible in the work of Denton Corker Marshall or Nation Fender Katsilidis, for example.

In my practice there are streams of urges and fascinations, which you will read about in the essay. In the desire to create a sense of belonging for a broad audience, I often add unrelated elements to this list of urges and fascinations at random. This technique has a precursor in Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt’s *Oblique Strategies*, and I have also used their tool while designing projects. The tool in question is a series of cards designed to be used during a creative process. When stuck on a problem or seeking inspiration to act, or when an eclectic approach is desired, a designer selects one of these cards from the deck at random and follows the instruction written on it. I have just been instructed to “Go outside. Shut the door.” …

...I’m back now, and I have selected another card which says “Is it finished?”

Well, it is not finished, as I need to write about the observations I’ve made of this happening in practice. I have observed that *wildcards* are a very powerful tool in collaboration, as they allow one to incorporate an opposing point of view into a design, as can be seen in *Scandinavian Freestyle*. It is most powerful in designing though when clients, or their constituents, have a very singular expectation of what the work should mean to them, as I have written about in the project section on *Practicing in Kuala Lumpur and Qinhuangdao*.

*Wildcards* allow us to build a compelling architectural language out of absolutely anything. In the project section on *Practicing in Kuala Lumpur and Qinhuangdao*, I have written about how we created such a language in the design of the *Hevea Tower* for Lembaga Getah Malaysia, where our client could only accept, or even see, a proposal if it was instantly recognisable as being symbolic of rubber. This runs the risk of producing very poor architecture. The practice of making the plan drawing of a building visually representative of a recognisable thing, and then extruding this plan to give the buildings spatial qualities (the method we were being encouraged to use by the project’s construction managers) is a very easy way to satisfy this type of urge from a client, and the results of this can be seen in most corporate architecture in Malaysia. In the case of *Hevea Tower*, however, we were able to give our clients the sense of ownership that comes from symbolism, while also developing a complex and compelling architectural language with the potential to offer a sense of belonging and a lingering sense of familiarity to a broader audience.

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34 Large architecture practices operating in Australia and the Asian region.

35 *Oblique Strategies* is a card ‘game’ by Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt 1975.
Bruegelage

Interrogations into nine concurrent creative practices.

‘Bruegelage’ is the term that I have coined to capture in a single word the basis of my design practices. The word is a composite:

Brueg = Bruegel and the multiplicity that his paintings capture
bricolage = the construction of a work from a diverse set of things
brueg = brug = bridge
ue = sounds like ‘intuition’
gelage = feast

The processes of design, the assumptions on which decisions are made, the methods and types of collaboration undertaken, and the projects that my practice manifests are varied and tangled. These are at times exclusive to a particular project, and at others, evident in many. In conducting this research, I have sorted these design processes into nine types in order to illuminate their nature, describe how they are brought to bear on projects, and to make explicit the findings that have arisen from having observed them.

The processes are articulated in this essay, and the projects in which their use was observed are also discussed. They include: design through intuition and explicit strategy; design through chunking and interrupting chunking; design through a deliberate pursuit of discomfort; design through abrogation of the author; advocacy as a design process; and a technique I have titled ‘fake-it until you make-it’.
a) Design through explicit re-working of the propositions of other architects

There are a number of instances where the work of other architects is levered into my own. Sometimes this is done in an explicit way, and efforts are made, as the design evolves, to preserve the essence, or recognisability, of the original. This I call copying, and proudly so. This comes from a desire to make lineage explicit. Working on a project in Al Ain, and on another in Elizabeth Street, Melbourne, I reconfigured windows from Marcel Breuer’s Whitney Museum as a figure in reverse. I learned to copy explicitly from exposure to the work of Ashton Raggatt McDougall, such as in The Howard Kronberg Clinic, where The Vana Venturi House, by Venturi and Rauch, was ‘copied’ to create the design of a health clinic, or in The Gallery of Aboriginal Australia, where The Extension to the Jewish Museum in Berlin was ‘copied’ to create a design for a gallery.

I learned to copy that particular Marcel Breuer window by copying Edmund & Corrigan, who repatriated it to the RMIT University’s Building 8 on Swanston Street. But was I copying Edmund & Corrigan, or was I skipping a generation and copying Marcel Breuer? And who was Marcel Breuer copying? Was he the original genius? Were Breuer’s windows a reference to coffins, with whom they share a similar form. But let us leave Marcel’s intimate processes aside for another researcher and get back to the matter at hand, as I don’t really think I was copying anyone.

What I was in fact doing, I think, was taking part in a sort of communal design. By repatriating Marcel Breuer’s window in almost the same way that Edmund & Corrigan did, and by contributing to the debate about copying, as propelled by Ashton Raggatt McDougall, I am in fact taking part in and constructing a wireless, and direct, community of practice.

b) Design through less explicit re-working

At other times the levering of the work of others is less explicit, even though it does start out that way. In these instances, in the more recent work of my practice, the desire to make explicit the lineage on which a given design is based is left to the telling of the story of the design process, and there is no burden placed on the resulting design that its origins be immediately recognisable.

In the project section on Wattle Avenue House, you will read about the plan of the house being modelled on that of a house designed by my father—a house in which I lived as a child. There is scant resemblance between the two plans, and without being told to look, and without knowing the story of how the design developed, a future researcher would probably find none. As the design of the house evolved, the influence of other fascinations, urges, the ambitions of other designers, and the needs of clients, affected the project changing it, for the better, into what it ultimately became.

c) Design through implicit reference to everyday objects

I don’t expect that anyone would really recognise the plan of 36 3rd Street, the house in which I spent some of my childhood, in the plan of Wattle Avenue House, even if it were made explicit. The former was never published, and I can count on one hand the people I know that will likely ever visit both.

That I chose it as the starting point for the design of the house in Mildura was only because 36 3rd Street exists in
my own personal bank of places that I have visited. The last time I visited that house was in 1986. I was 14 years old, and interested more in the girl across the road, and my BMX, than I was in architecture. I would have been aware of architecture as a profession, being the son and grandson of architects, but to say that I had any awareness of the detail of what they did would be inaccurate. The house entered my personal bank of visited places before I began to think (or act) knowingly about architecture. This personal bank of places, as Leon van Schaik writes about in Spatial Intelligence, is something that everyone has.¹

Let me recall an anecdote in order to introduce a point that I would like to make. I love the smell of bus fumes. Possibly they are carcinogenic, but they produce in me a most palpable nostalgia. When I pick up their scent, they consistently give me a sense that I am remembering something, but without knowing fully well what I am remembering. Bus fumes make me feel at home. I have speculated that this familiarity comes from spending the very first years of my life living in a house on a bus route. In spite of this hypothesis, the bus fumes continue to conceal the detail of the memory they recall.

As a result of this reflective practice research, I began to wonder if, and then became more certain that, in a manner, this is one of the strategies I employ in my work. I have observed that I have been designing using a bricolage of generally recognisable everyday objects in a way that is, on the one hand, explicit, so as to precipitate recall, but on the other hand, and at the same time, implicit, so that a consciousness of the cause of the recall remains concealed. In their respective project sections, I write about the implicit traces of a Paul Smith shirt in Wattle Avenue House, of Isadora Duncan and Starsky & Hutch in Café Bourgeois, a sandwich board in A-Table, elephants in the Edithvale Seaford Werriands Discovery Centre and argyle socks in The Keys to Mildura.

Interrogating my earlier works revealed an interest in making explicit these references. Without my prompting, you will find in OverLogo a tram ticket, in Ray Table a Sting Ray and in Sugar Station, a shopping bag. These design moves are in part born of a learning lineage. Working for Ashton Raggatt McDougall, and operating under the stated intentions of the design team, I inserted Ron Robertson Swan’s The Vault into most projects I worked on, Daniel Liebeskind’s Extension to the Jewish Museum into The Gallery for Aboriginal Australia, and a series of picture frames and a handkerchief into the Brisbane Central retail and office complex. These types of design moves are part of an interest in the act of spatial transformation that occurs when the expected scale of an object is distorted, in the same way that when we find Gulliver tied up upon the beach, or when we are faced with Arnaud Hendrickx’s Too big beam, we realise that we are a much smaller, or larger, part of the universe than we thought.²

Consider the ‘etymology’ of a design decision. This design decision may have its origins in historical projects by others that haunt me; or in design methods learned from teachers, peers and mentors; or could be a response to moves by collaborators; or could have its origins in habits - both good and bad. This could be described as personal design wisdom being constantly adjusted and added to. There are times when it is empowering to have these etymologies made explicit—and indeed practice-based research is about doing...
just that. Let us call this ‘design through explicit strategy’. There are also times when it is important that strategies remain implicit and the network of assumptions remain unconscious. Let us call this ‘design through intuition’.

For example, I have found, especially on large and/or complex projects, that the architect is the only person on a team who knows a little about all of the issues in play, while the other team members usually know a lot about a single thing, but know and care very little about the rest. This means that architects or designers, often need to make the first guess in chicken-and-egg type situations: if you ask the engineer how many levels of a building can be built on a particular soil type, he might say “that depends on how much money you want to spend on shoring up the foundations”. When this question is in turn put to the client, she will probably say “well, that depends on how much floor area you can put in my building”. Were it left to the client and the engineer alone, the design process would become stuck in a chicken-and-egg dilemma. So it falls upon the architect to make the first guess—and draw a tower of a certain size. This allows for a ratio to begin to be calculated between cost and floor area, and then the costs and sizes are adjusted and adjusted until a mutually agreeable result is reached. The design process has begun.

In the example above, there are only two forces at play against each other. If we examine instances of this on an actual project, we see that there are multiple and layered versions of this conundrum at every turn. Even in the simple example, the architect must act through intuition, lest he or she become caught in the same conundrum—even more so, as is usually the case, when the issues are more numerous and intertwined. For example, in the design of Hevea Tower in the LGM Master-plan in KL, the net area occupied by the client, the number of internal voids, the number of external voids, the number of lifts, the type of air-handling system, the structural system, the number of car spaces, the complexity of the façade system, the number of formal entrances, the decision whether or not to allow operable windows and the construction program are all interrelated. These items, and more, are all in flux, and no one can be solved alone, so the designer must dive into a soup of the unknown and guess at something to get the design process moving.

The unpacking of ‘design by intuition’ interrupts the intuitive act. I have observed, as a result, a tendency to avoid unpacking intuitive acts during a design process—but there are risks associated with never unpacking them. During the design of The Edithvale Seaford Wetlands Discovery Centre, too many of the design decisions were undertaken intuitively, and no effort or process was put aside to unpack them. And so an ‘etymology’ of the design had to be invented to enable us to speak publicly about the building. The design process has begun.

There is an extended discussion around this in the project section relating to The Edithvale Seaford Wetlands Discovery Centre. Ironically, the invention of design etymology became the actual design etymology, as the process of creating a comprehensive story around the building affected our approach to its design. I often tell my students that ‘post rationalisation’ is not a dirty word. This is a way of saying that the neat telling of an ordered story about a design process often comes about after a very dis-ordered period of design. In the case of The Edithvale Seaford Wetlands Discovery Centre, this ‘post-rationalisation’ actually took place during the design process, and ended up informing the design. It is also interesting, and perhaps more instructive, to examine ‘design through intuition’ when it is used hand in hand with design ‘through explicit strategy’. When designing through intuition, a test for the success of a particular move can best be described as looking for the moment when something ‘feels right’. By contrast, when designing with an explicit strategy, the test for success is when that particular strategic ambition has been met. An example of this is the
OverLogo project, where we set out to give the audience of the work a sense that they were a small part of a big machine—the city. This was achieved by taking a small everyday object and increasing its scale one hundred fold. That object was a tram ticket from the time before the public transport network was privatised and tram conductors were decommissioned.

The combination of these two strategies—design through intuition and design through explicit strategy—is outlined in the next sub-section.

e) Design through ‘chunking’, and interrupting ‘chunking’

I have observed a distinction between intuition and ‘chunking’ within my practice. Within any given design process they may overlap at times, but they are quite different. Intuition gives me a sense that something may work, or not, before testing it. I need not have practised the task at hand for intuition to be at play. It gives a sense of a possibility that has never been considered before. In the design of Table Ray, I make just such an intuitive leap. But this differs from chunking, where a series of related tasks are pre-learned—either through habit or plan.

‘Chunking’ is the process by which the brain automates complex tasks. For example, when learning to reverse park for the first time, great concentration is required to simultaneously balance accelerator and clutch, watch for traffic on both sides of the car, turn the wheel one way as your door lines up with the door of the car beside you, and then the other way just as the nose of your car passes the rear of the one in front, while understanding the spatial constraints of your own car, even though you cannot see the car’s extents.

As you practice, it begins to take a little less concentration to perform this task. Once one has been driving for years, it can be done without much concentration by most people, even with a screaming child in the rear and the radio blaring. As the brain concentrates on a complex thing repeatedly, it stores these operations in a chunk. The more that action is practised, the more ingrained the chunk becomes. Instructions from a ‘chunk’ can be interrupted, of course. Should a bicycle suddenly appear in your side rear-view mirror, the brain interrupts the instructions from the ‘chunk’ and engages concentration, at which point the screaming child and blaring radio become difficult to tolerate.

If, having driven a car with a manual gearbox for years, you start driving an automatic, most people find that driving in un-complex circumstances, like straight down the road in traffic can easily be achieved. However, when a complex task is undertaken, and the brain accesses the same ‘chunk’ it has always had to complete the task, a person will find their left foot, instructed by the ‘chunk’, unconsciously reaching for the clutch, but finding none there. This means that while interrupting instructions from a ‘chunk’ is easy, re-writing the ‘chunk’ is just as hard, if not harder, than learning it in the first place.

There are instances where I have set out to deliberately ‘chunk’ something knowing that, at some point in the near future, a period of intense design may be required by a project, but under time pressure, making careful concentration necessary. I have observed this in the design practice of Paul Minifie, where the self-initiated Streaming House project was designed without a client, site or brief. Subsequently, in the Suishe Waterfront design competition entry, which was conducted under extreme time pressure, Streaming House was pulled from the drawer in which it had been archived, scaled up and placed on
the water’s edge of Suishe as a pavilion.

Similarly, Ashton Raggatt McDougall’s entry for the Federation Square design competition entry can be seen as ‘chunking’ for their winning National Museum of Australia competition entry—both of which are part of the history of my practice, having worked on both projects before graduating from my bachelor degree.

That instructions from ‘chunks’ can be interrupted is very important for my practice, as few projects are alike. This means that a method can be employed, and then cleaved open and something added to it, without re-programming the ‘chunk’. This can be seen at work in The Edithvale Seaford Wetlands Discovery Centre where, in the design of the panels, a design method that had been ‘chunked’ in the design of the façade of The Australian Wildlife Health Centre was employed, but then interrupted with The Edithvale Seaford Wetlands Discovery Centre’s specific additions.

The practice of chunking in design is not a given on any project. On a project like OverLogo, for example, there is little evidence of chunking. The project was not spatially or collaboratively complex enough to warrant it.

f) Design through a deliberate pursuit of discomfort

Jonah Lehrer writes about how Stravinsky’s Rite of Spring, when it was first performed, caused a riot which the police had to be called in to quell, and that this was exactly what Stravinsky had been hoping for. According to Lehrer, Stravinsky had identified, without knowing it, that our ear expects to hear repeated patterns that it knows. By making small variations to these patterns, composers manipulate emotions: a minor note, played when a major note is expected, leads to a sense of melancholy. Similarly, when Lars Spuybroek gave a talk in Sydney about his strange architectural forms, he talked about looking for what made him uncomfortable. He was talking about this in the context of how form emerges from automated design processes. In this context, an architect designs and sets in play a series of complex automated systems which grow over time. As these systems grow and change of their own accord, the architect must decide when to stop the system in order for a form to be generated. This can also be seen in the work of Roland Snooks. In order to decide when to stop the system, the architect is looking for something in the system. In Spuybroek’s words, if the architect is looking for something she likes, or something that makes her feel good, then she will only find what she already knows. To find something new, he argued, the architect must search for something that makes him uncomfortable—a theme also picked up in Vivian Mitsogianni’s PhD research.

While there are scant examples of emergent design in my practice (with the exception of The Edithvale Seaford Wetlands Discovery Centre—and this is arguably more part of Paul Minifie’s practice than my own), I have observed this type of looking for something, as described by Spuybroek, in the act of composition. When composing, or arranging through intuition, this same ‘looking for something’ is taking place. For example, in OverLogo (and so too in the Brisbane Central project), I was looking for something that was out of place. The composition of the annexe to Wattle Avenue House is deliberately awkward, which inspired one passer-by to ask an architectural photographer...
taking photos for a publication “When will it be finished?” This poking of people’s consciousness, whereby they become aware of the spatial and built environment they occupy, is like being tickled, where suddenly one becomes aware of sense and reactive tendencies that lie dormant unless prodded. Richard Blythe has written about this in his work on the ‘Ticklish’ Subject of Architecture.7

This ‘pursuit of discomfort’ is ever evolving and cannot be done unconsciously. Everyone’s ears have now become so accustomed to the Rite of Spring that it is a common Walt Disney soundtrack, and emblematic of all that is nice and safe in the world. When the Rite of Spring is performed today, the police are not called. Consider Voronoi tessellations, for example, which can be found on the façade of The Centre for Ideas at the Victorian College of the Arts—the first use of these in a built architectural composition. At the time, this building—while recognised as ground breaking, and thus receiving many awards—was difficult to like, and its reviews were not all favourable. A dozen years later, and Voronoi tessellations are used in the generation of architectural grammar and form by architects all over the world.

During the design of OverLogo, the scaling up of the image as a design strategy had an immediate and crass quality which interested me. It was the opposite of pleasing. It gave us the sense of being messy, and even a little rude. It made me and my collaborator uncomfortable. “Can we just do that?”, we asked ourselves. Years later, during the design of Wattle Avenue House, I contemplated creating the internal façade wall as a recognisable image. It was a strategy that had worked in the past, so why not use it again?

However, the ability of this strategy to unsettle me had dispersed. Instead, I chose to use an explicit image, but allowed the process of building it from bricks to abstract it so that it could only be known through inside knowledge. The idea that two images, one with spatial and pop-cultural associations, and another which represented the locale, could be blended in such a way as to make each un-recognisable, and that the story of their making would be known only to those who share the story verbally was an idea that unsettled me. Its complexity and grey areas interested me. That it made me uncomfortable allowed me to consider it as an experiment involving risk. The previous experiments, with their risks already taken, were no longer of interest.

This method of designing where the explicit is deliberately made implicit is also related to the sense of strange familiarity that I have written about it section e) of this essay.

g) Design through abrogation of the author

I like to design beautiful things. It gives me pleasure to simply sit, and compose a drawing, or reshape a plan, or make a virtual model. Also, rather than buy gifts for birthdays and other celebrations, I prefer to make drawings, or objects. But what is this beauty, and how do I decide what is beautiful? How can I even say that it is I that has chosen how this object will turn out? Through the methods of this reflective research, I have developed an understanding of how the projects of my practice are authored.

Reflection takes place through observation, and then through the documentation of the reflection, not only in the reflection itself. This is because writing and thinking are linked. A novelist does not write a novel in their head and then type it up. The idea for the novel begins in an author’s imagination, but the thinking that goes into it happens through diagramming, research, the making of notes and the writing itself. So too, the making of an object, or drawing a plan, or composing an elevation does not come from the idea of how to do it alone. It comes from the idea and the doing itself.

Describing me as the author of the objects that I make as gifts seems a reasonable thing to do. These objects are made in a compressed time frame, in solitude, and without feedback from any other person. Even so, each gift is for another person, so my imagining of

them has some effect on the outcome. I can thus say that on some wireless level, in designing these objects, I have collaborated with the intended recipient of the gift.

Also, the ideas come from somewhere. In 2013, I made a set of mobiles from flower wire, buttons and felt. The careful balancing of the objects and the perfect compliance of the wire at the hand of the pliers felt like an exquisite act of ‘me’. That said, they are highly derivative of the works of Juan Miro and Alexander Calder. So, even in works created by me alone, the authorship is unclear.

I bring your attention back to my practice. Design is a process. In every project that I have examined, not a single one became manifest in the form that I initially imagined. The process of doing the design through iteration, repetition and failure is how each design came into fruition. It is even possible to go so far as to say that, in some cases, the process is where the idea came from—so much so that often the ideas only come once the project was in fact complete, as in the case of The Edithvale Seaford Wetlands Discovery Centre, where the need to describe our design approach to an audience preceded our explicit awareness of the ideas that had informed it.

In the profession of architecture, there exists a myth about sole authorship, despite the large number of people that are involved in every project. This type of claim to authorship ignores the contributions of others in any design process. It makes more sense, then, to attribute authorship to a design process than it does to attribute authorship to a building. I would like to be able to say here that I am in control of the design process that I immerse myself in; but having reflected on a series of processes on projects over the period of this research, I can say with confidence that this is not entirely accurate.

Each project has, at least, a client who commissions the project; the client’s constituents; people who make use of it; authorities whose laws the project must comply with; specialists on whose advice the design relies; other designers whom we design with; and employees to whom design tasks are delegated. All of these people are part of the process of an idea moving from inception to becoming manifest in design. To say that an author has no control over a design process is a radical thing to say about the theory of design process, and raises questions about the ability of any person having sole agency in the making of design decisions. In my observations I have noticed that, rather than controlling the process, designers submit themselves to being part of it, as is elegantly represented in the photograph of the micro-light aircraft, and its pilot, flying in formation with a flock of birds—all equal members of the same family.

Looking back at OverLogo, and having reflected on the process, it is clear to me that the one thing my collaborator, Lou Weis, and I had done in the design process was that we took it upon ourselves to be advocates for the project—something that is not really possible without a sense of ownership. The team of people that is involved in each of my projects is like a family, and I am a very important member of that family. It is interesting to observe that in projects where the family relationship broke down, and I was not able to repair it, the resulting outcome was of poor quality, and was demolished shortly after construction. You can read about an instance this in the project section on Café Bourgeois.

The process of advocacy, and the substance of what is advocated for are tools of design in my practice. It is simply my belief in and advocacy for the importance of referential, eclectic collage brought together through intuitive composition that bring together families of people in each
project to make manifest a designed object. The beliefs are strongly held, but the process is loose and always different—in part because this is necessary in collaboration, but more so because this looseness in collage and composition is a key part of the design ambitions of my practice.

This vein of belief underwriting the design practice is referred to by Veronika Valk as the ‘substrate’ of her practice, and Richard Blythe talks about the application of this substrate as ‘building a substantial process’ in his ‘Ticklish Subject of Architecture’ lectures from 2013. 8, 9

h) Advocacy as a design process

A number of the projects of my practice, such as 59a Bourke Street and The Keys to Mildura, are speculative projects. By this I mean that the clients for these projects only became aware of the existence of these projects when I presented the initial designs to them. In this sense, design is being used as a way to argue that something should come into existence. Design, in this sense, is a form of advocacy.

Can this understanding of design be observed taking place through the advocacy that happens outside of a traditional design process? An example of such is Terroir’s ‘contraption’, which designs a kind of space in which something might exist, rather than designing the thing itself. 8 Volunteer governance in arts organisations and owners’ corporations, public speaking, teaching, and inventing commissions are all parts of my practice that, for the most part, involve advocacy.

On the board of Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces, I argued that the gallery should take ownership of the massive urban gentrification that it sparked, and relocate itself to an area where vested interests would be prepared to pay in advance for this gentrification to be brought to them. This, rather than the design of a physical creative work, is the design of a framework; but getting to a point where this framework is imagined, understood and accepted is a design process in itself, involving intuition, reworking, and other methods already discussed. However, the thinking takes places not through drawing, but rather conversation, and later writing—usually in the form of record taking or written proposals. In certain instances, this type of advocacy has led to projects being actualised. The invitation to design Wattle Avenue House was the result of advocating that the community of Mildura rediscover the sense of identity through the built environment that it once had. This same advocacy was also manifest in the exhibition of urban propositions for Mildura that MvS Architects exhibited at the London Festival of Architecture in 2010, and other projects in Mildura, which you can read about in the project section about The Keys to Mildura. This same type of project invention is also evident in 59a Bourke Street, though here it is arguably more straightforwardly an act designed to generate a commission. All the same, there are elements of this project (which you can read about in the project section of the same name) in which I observed the project arising out of my advocating for inner Melbourne to evolve through taking on the characteristics of another city, Tokyo, which I had recently visited.

In the Scandinavian Freestyle projection section, you can read about how—at the scale of an interior rather than a building or city—the entrance lobby of an apartment building came to be redesigned as a result of my advocating on behalf of a community of owners.

i) Fake-it until you make-it

This is a method that I have observed myself employing on a number of projects and in a range of circumstances. Essentially it makes use of a place-holder as a design tool. The principle underlying it is that design requires the simultaneous proposing of multiple ideas, the solving of numerous problems, taking into account many agendas and the incorporation of advice from a range of specialists. To undertake all these in earnest at once can lead to stasis through creative, intellectual and computational overload, so some method is required to isolate digestible sub-components of
smaller sets of inter-related things. Simply redacting all but the one sub-component on which you are working does not solve the problem, as some way of keeping in mind the parts not being worked on is necessary in order to bring to bear the connectivity that each sub-set has with the greater whole. Also, to resolve any one sub-set too completely will remove its ability to be flexible and thus remain adjustable in relation to the others.

To get around these constraints, each sub-section is designed to a point where, without detailed scrutiny, it ‘looks like’ it works—like a graphic version of Karl Popper’s theory of provisional knowledge, which allows knowledge to be applied, while still being held in question.10 Subsequently, the other sub-components are resolved provisionally. Once everything is resolved in this way, then a closer scrutiny is applied, and each sub-set of inter-related components is evolved to ‘look like’ it works a little better. After having repeated this process a number of times, the design evolves from something that ‘looks like’ it works to something that actually works. Interestingly, this moment occurs at different points in different projects, and is not in fact a single moment at all, but rather a gentle emerging.

These observations come to light most noticeably in the chapters sections on Practicing in Kuala Lumpur and Qinhuangdao and The Edithvale Seaford Wetlands Discovery Centre. In both of these projects placeholders were required—for different reasons. The former included a development of a master-plan in which there was a need for a high level of detailed architectural representation, like detailed images showing fully resolved buildings. The scope, program and fees of the project did not allow for this to actually take place; instead, the images needed to be designed so that it appeared as if the buildings within the master-plan were fully resolved. In reflecting on this project, it became clear that this is a part of how I always work. Underlying this technique is my interest in the graphic nature of the work of Venturi Scott Brown, Ashton Raggatt McDougall and Lyons Architecture, and also the fact that while studying architecture I developed skills in, and ran a business delivering high-end architectural visualisations for architects in Melbourne, such as Lyons, Ashton Raggatt McDougall and Edmond and Corrigan.

This method then, I am arguing, has arisen from methods particular to my practice. However, given that the practice of architecture is primarily engaged with the preparation of instructions (in the form of a graphic medium: drawings to be given to others), perhaps it can be said that there is no difference between something that ‘looks like’ it works, and something that in fact does work—levels of scrutiny notwithstanding.

These nine types of design processes, presented in order above, are employed in a tangled way and are enmeshed with the ways in which my communities of practice inform my acts of design. However, if (after reading about these nine types of design processes) you have formed the idea that in my practice, these strategies are stated explicitly before being used, or together make up a sort of design manual from which I work, then I would like to disabuse you of it. While I have made these design processes explicit in an ordered manner, I do not use them in a plain and ordered manner. In fact, as I have observed, the knotted manner in which they occur is integral to my practice. This is a key finding of my reflective research, and I will say more about it in the conclusion.

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The reflections which underpin this research were conducted on a project-by-project basis, and the projects themselves took place over the period of a decade. The process of interrogation involved examining the relationship between multiple facets of each project. A project’s client, the design collaborators, the ambitions of each project, sketches, drawings and images, technical constraints, budgetary constraints, legal constraints, mistakes, failures (and in one case demolition), and the final outcome are all treated as material suitable for interrogation in seeking to uncover new knowledge pertaining to creative practice.

From a long list of projects (see the list published in this document, after the conclusion), eleven projects which are key to my practice and representative of a range of types, have been chosen for dissection and reflection.

These projects are:

1. OverLogo
2. Scandinavian Freestyle
3. Three Exhibitions
4. Wattle Avenue House
5. Three Tables
6. The Keys to Mildura
7. Practicing in Kuala Lumpur and Qinhuangdao
8. Sugar Station Chain
9. Cafe Bourgeois
10. 59a Bourke Street
11. The Edithvale Seaford Wetlands Discovery Centre
I began reflecting on OverLogo by examining the collaborative process, which underpinned its creation. Firstly, the project was extra-curricular. The decision to embark upon it was conceived jointly by Lou Weis and me in the early part of our careers. I was working for Ashton Raggatt McDougall as a 3d computer operator and Lou was searching for a career (he is now the director of Broached Commissions). Together we decided to submit an expression of interest to the City of Melbourne’s Laneway Commissions Public Art Program. The project was planned—and built around—the gaps in our primary work commitments. To understand the creative process behind the project, it cannot be examined in isolation; rather, it must be examined in the context in which it was embedded. Circulating amongst my peers and employers was the text The Reconfigured Eye, which examines how digital image manipulation changes the way we interpret images.
in which I was then proficient—and which has subsequently evolved into a complex system—was then a simple tool that manipulated a grid of pixels to achieve realistic representation of non-existent or impossible images and scenes.

I had many ideas—all of which were shut down by my collaborator. They were, by turns, too obvious, too oblique, too derivative, too naïve, too esoteric and so on. We came close to blows on a number of occasions during the process of design, during construction and installation, and even after its publication, where *OverLogo* was erroneously attributed exclusively to my collaborator—an oversight which has since been rectified.

These anecdotes are relevant because the concept, design and fabrication processes of the project were fraught with conflict. Upon reflection, there was some form of conflict involved in all the projects examined for this research. For the most part, this conflict is productive and is an important part of the creative process. However, in some cases, it has brought projects to an un-amicable end. In my practice, conflict during the creative process allows me to challenge the approach and ideas of those working with me and to be open to my collaborators challenging my approach, at which point the creation of something new occurs. This is not brainstorming—a practice that allows any idea to be put forward, no matter how ludicrous, simply to get creative energy flowing, and suspends judgement. Brainstorming is a woolly process, and one that Jonah Lehrer argues is in fact ineffective.4 Not yet realising that these conflicts were productive, stoicism alone spurred us on in the design process. Eventually, the idea of reproducing something small at a larger scale stuck in our minds. I am haunted by over-scaled artworks, such as Claes Oldenburg’s *Clothespin* and Ron Mueck’s *Boy*, and I have a fascination with the kitsch phenomenon of the giant pineapple, lobster, merino sheep, and other such objects.6 These appeal to me because of their ability to communicate how we live in a universe where we are far less significant than we realise, but also, as in *Gulliver’s Travels*, because we live in a universe where we are far more significant than we realise.7 An interest in these ideas as a design strategy can also be seen in Ashton Raggatt McDougall’s *Melbourne Central* project, on which I worked some years later.8


Brugelage

Detail drawing of OverLogo
Image by MvA Architects
The idea began as a super-scaled tram ticket, dating from when Melbourne’s trams were publicly owned—an object with which millions of commuters from the 1970s or 1980s (including myself) were very familiar. Our initial thought on how to scale it up was to find one, scan it, and re-print it as a billboard. This would have been possible—and markedly more cost effective—but we had an urge to make a thing, not just a large image. Billboards, which are designed to be viewed from a distance, have a remarkably abstract quality when viewed up-close: each pixel seems impossibly large—that is, too large for a group of them to effectively register as an image. We were attuned to being conscious of this disarming sense through exposure to William J. Mitchell’s book, upon which we thought we could build.

The work originally had two components. One was a tram ticket and the other the logo of the national telephone network. Both had recently been given new logos to coincide with their privatisation. Budgetary constraints forced us to choose one component only, and we opted for the local—one of all the cities in Australia, only Melbourne has a substantial tram network. The political content of this work is interesting to consider in the context of the work of Ashton Raggatt McDougall. The National Museum of Australia, a project on which I was employed, is replete with explicit political content. Since then, I have preferred the implicit, as evident in Wattle Avenue House and the Edithvale Seaford Wetlands Discovery Centre.

The Howard/Kronborg Clinic, by Ashton Raggatt McDougall, which many of my peers worked on, was widely published in Melbourne, and was presented as part of Howard Raggatt’s research masters at RMIT University. This had brought to my consciousness an idea that a unit-based building material could be used as a pixel. (In the case of the clinic, a brick was used.) Wanting to develop the idea, rather than copy it directly, and being constrained by our budget and the temporary nature of the project (its tenure was ten months), we began to look for unit-based building materials without the weight, cost and permanence of brick.

Simultaneously, I was interested in Gottfried Semper’s idea that one of architecture’s origins lay in the sides of the tent wherein the depictions of myths were woven by the same threads that bound the tent together. To pursue this interest, we imagined a giant weaving. This went some way in satisfying our urge to make a thing, but not far enough, as a weaving exists in two dimensions.

Liking the weaving idea, but wanting the piece to have some object qualities, we conceived of sewing an array of

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Brugeloge

Project 01 — OverLogo

OverLogo close up
Images by Jan van Schaik
OverLogo from the corporate lobby opposite
Image by Jan van Schalk
coloured table-tennis balls to shade cloth and then hanging it like a curtain. This worked well in theory, but the practicalities of it were prohibitive. The work’s size—3m x 14m—would have made colouring it and sewing onto it an unmanageable amount of table-tennis balls with exacting precision a daunting task. The shade cloth, too, was a problem, as its elevation above the wall on which the work was to be fixed would have created wind-load so great that the structure would have required lateral bracing beyond our means. As such, we searched for larger spheres and alternative fixing method.

I am intrigued by Andreas Gursky’s large-scale photographs which are filled with everyday objects—for example, in 99 Cent II from 2001. The photographs leave me with a peculiar sense that the qualities of an object are dramatically different when viewed in isolation, as opposed to when objects are viewed within an enormous array of similar objects. This inspired the interest in a large quantity of table-tennis balls. However, the source of the fascination with large numbers of spheres came from a Gursky-esque fascination with playpen pits (lest you read into this some childhood experience writ large in an artwork, I will assure you that I have never experienced a play-pen pit first hand).

Having been forced to abandon the table-tennis balls, we went back to that source and found that play-pen spheres could also be ordered in bulk and did not require colouring as they were available in white, yellow and black—the exact colours of the tram ticket that we were seeking to emulate.

The ultimate construction method came from my memory of a common childhood toy: an abacus. In this case, I am sure that I had played with at least one, even if I had not owned one of my own. Versions of them can be found in any toy store, and scaled up models can be found in most playgrounds. Conceiving of one large enough—and capable of taking the strains of gravity and wind—came from another object that I had spent many hours looking at from only centimetres away as I swam lap after lap in training for competitive swimming: a swimming pool lane divider. This interest in everyday objects can be traced through other projects, such as the lemon juicer in the Keys to Mildura, the shirt in Wattle Avenue House and the sandwich board in A-Table.

What can be learned about my practice by examining this project is that conflict can be productive, that an interest in the re-use of everyday objects is evident at the point of ideation, and that the method of design relies on pursuing an interest or fascination amongst a family of collaborators. Also, I note that a persistent nudging of a set of interests, as opposed to insistence on a pre-imagined singular solution, is important to allow for the iteration of a design idea over time.
Project 02 — Scandinavian Freestyle
In 2008, my advice was informally sought regarding security and maintenance issues of the building’s foyer, including the viability of installing a pot plant in the lobby. I argued that the plant, which had been requested in the hope of livening up the lobby, was insufficient for this purpose, and would only make the space’s failings more evident. Furthermore, I argued that an informal approach to the management of the aesthetic of the building would lead to the devaluation of the properties within and that formal advice should be sought.

By examining Scandinavian Freestyle, I have evolved my understanding of how my place in my community of practice affects my design practice and how it affects the design of others. It has also given me insight into how the physical context of a site is dealt with conceptually and how my methods of designing in relation to site evolved into methods that are quite different from those applied by the community of practice in which I was most active while undertaking my bachelor degree. My progressive evolution in regards to conceptually approaching a site and context can additionally be read about in the section on Wattle Avenue House.

Completed in 1954, the former Russell Street Telephone Exchange & Post Office is a unique multi-storey CBD building – the first to be completed after World War II and the last to express the architectural traditions of solid masonry. In 2001, it was redeveloped as the Hero Apartments by Nonda Katsalidis Architects with the addition of six levels of apartments adorned with a series of architectural features, including vertical planes, structural plates, green columns and a core ten box.

Scandinavian Freestyle

A subtle renovation to an existing foyer of a large apartment building with Fiona Abicare

This in itself was not sufficient to convince the committee that money should be spent hiring an architect. They felt that they could not justify the money spent on the services of a consultant who would add value to the building. The committee appreciated and enjoyed the lobbies, however I was not able to demonstrate well enough the role that design played in their appreciation of each of the lobbies visited.

They could, however, appreciate the value that art brought. Art has tangible re-sale value and this value appreciates over time. Architecture, however, does not appreciate in direct economic value over time. Land appreciates, but that which is built upon it depreciates. Thus, suggesting that the owner’s corporation invest funds in an artwork was met with welcome ears.

To bring these constraints together, and to make best use of a particular line-item in the budget that had been placed against an artwork, I suggested that the committee engage an artist whose work was about the crossover of public interior space and the concept of art, and brief the artist to consider the entire foyer as an artwork. The idea that funds apportioned for an artwork should be spent engaging an artist to re-design the lobby, thus making the lobby into an artwork in its own right, was accepted by the committee. It was stipulated that collaboration with an architect would be required to ensure that the design works were properly insured, properly managed, that the outcome would be ‘suitably practical’ (their words) and would comply with the building code, planning code and the OH&S Act.

MvS Architects is not a practice whose business model is to provide documentation and project management support for other designers. However, having invested - via my advocacy - in the re-design of the lobby, turning the commission down was not really an option. Also, given that it fell to me to propose an artist, I could effectively chose a collaborator with whom I would be happy to work with.

Previously, I had collaborated with Fiona Abicare on the design of a table and a screen, the former of which was subsequently featured in the exhibitions Hole in the bucket and the latter was exhibited in ACCA’s NEW11. My practice, outside of being employed by others, began with collaborations with artists such as Charles Anderson (whose project Kenchiku wa gomi no sriari I collaborated on in 1999). I have subsequently worked with artists such as Julia Gorman, John Meade, Fiona Abicare and Lou Weis.

Abicare’s practice, concerned as it is with the relationship between interior domestic space and display space, was what I had in mind when I had conceived of an artist capable of creating an interior space as an artwork in its own right. I recommended her to the committee and the project was


Charles Anderson, Julia Gorman, John Meade, Fiona Abicare and Lou Weis are all artists working in Melbourne.

Act None at ACCA’s NEW11 with Fiona Albicar
What we can learn from this is that an important part of the design process of my practice is advocacy. By advocacy, in this instance, I mean having a vision of a possibility and arguing its case, such that the possibility becomes a project—much like how a producer designs a film. Scandinavian Freestyle is a project that I designed into being.

Beyond advocacy for production, there was also my role in the design once Abicare and I were commissioned. Abicare was commissioned as principle designer and my role centred on the planning codes. To Abicare’s eye, there were a number of existing elements in the original lobby that had remarkable qualities in their own right, including the large marble wall panels, the hard plaster surfaces, and the copper expansion joints in the original Terrazzo floor. These, she felt, should become a significant part of the new design. This approach, despite my initial reticence towards it, is not dissimilar to that taken on Wattle Avenue House.

It is interesting to look at the nature of the collaboration. The planning of the space was largely my responsibility, and the design details largely Abicare’s, yet we were each required to sign off on our respective approaches. There was considerable friction before consensus was reached on any issue; but as in the OverLogo project and other collaborations, this friction was always productive. This friction is the moment where, in this instance, Fiona’s sensibilities, assumptions and compositional tendencies get interwoven with mine. This is also true in the reverse. She engaged me, as an employee not a collaborator, to assist in the design of some of the pattern making of her project FitOut in 2002, and the more eclectic and collage-like strategies of mine are visible in the ‘chair’ section of the work. As with all of my collaborations, authorship and the community of practice become very intertwined. This is also explored in the ‘Community of Practice’ section of the Display Only and FitOut with Fiona Abicare.

Also, it is interesting to note that design authorship on Scandinavian Freestyle is largely Abicare’s. Many of the decisions in which I was instrumental have no direct visible outcome beyond creating the project in the first place. The ‘design’ of my practice is not always the direct design of spaces or things; sometimes, it involves the design of policies and processes which facilitate and enable others. A different version of this method of working is explored in the project section on the Edithvale Seaford Wetlands Discovery Centre.
Looking towards the letterboxes
Image by Peter Bennett

The letterboxes
Image by Peter Bennett
Looking towards the front door
Image by Peter Bennetts
The mirror, the sear, the marble and the curtain

Image by Peter Bennetts
Each of these three projects involved a temporary re-design of a gallery space for a specific exhibition undertaken in collaboration with the respective curators. I have grouped them in a cluster as they are of a specific type, and there is much overlap between my reflections on each of them.

The first, located in Melbourne, was for a show entitled *Dying in spite of the Miraculous*, which was held at Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces in 2010. The exhibition was billed as part of that year’s Melbourne International Festival of the Arts and was curated by Alexie Glass, Simon Maidement and Emily Cormack.

The second, located in Adelaide at the Art Gallery of South Australia, housed *Parallel Collisions – the 12th Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art* in 2012, and was curated by Alexie Glass and Natasha Bullock. The exhibition was part of an ambitious program bequeathed by the gallery’s new director, Nicholas Mitzevich.

The third was in Sydney at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, and was the site for an exhibition of contemporary Australian photography curated by Natasha Bullock, and entitled *We used to talk about love*, again under the purview of a new director: Michael Brand.

The construction budgets for the projects were small, and the decision to undertake the projects brought little direct financial benefit to MvS Architects. They were, instead, undertaken to build strength in our folio in a particular approach to the design of gallery spaces. There is a ‘white box’ dichotomy which often arises between artists and architects in the discussion around the design of art galleries. The dichotomy goes along the lines that artists wish architects would stop interfering with the space of art and simply design a perfect white box with no discernible features to give art the unimpeded space to be itself, while the architects wish the artists would...
stop proliferating the idea that art can only be displayed in a neutral space and have the courage to make art that can be art in any environment.

I had the hunch that a productive middle ground between these two positions could be achieved by forming collaborations with curators—professionals trained in the practice of taking care with artworks such that they have the conceptual space required to be appreciated in their own right, while at the same time being under the care of a broad conceptual umbrella. Based on this hunch, I pursued a series of collaborations.

In reflection, what is interesting about these projects in the context of my practice is that the conceptual approach to design preceded the collaborations and the projects produced by them. This same phenomenon is also noticeable, albeit to a lesser degree, in the chapters on OverLogo, Scandinavian Freestyle, The Keys to Mildura and 59a Bourke Street.

Typically, a client would have a strategic objective and seek the services of an architect to make these manifest. What I observed in some of my practices is a reversal of this, whereby I bring new strategic objectives to a project, changing its direction, or re-inventing it in its entirety.

In each of these projects there was an initial intention to make use of colour, in addition to the installation of walls, to re-configure the spaces and their perception. The idea, which varied in detail across the projects, was that the walls and ceilings of the space would be painted in two-tone colour. This technique is often used in Victorian interior architecture, where a picture rail might be placed in a room at the three-quarter mark up the wall. The wall below that might be painted white, while the wall above it and the ceiling would be painted pale yellow. This would give the effect of a tall space, if the upper colour was lighter, or a lowered, more intimate space if the upper colour was darker. Variations on this method of using colour to affect space can been seen in the work of Perrott Lyon Mathieson, in particular their use of the built shadow on their project for the Box Hill Institute of TAFE, and in any of the works by the artist Felice Varini—Tra il pieno e il vuoto. In each of the three exhibitions, I was able to interest the curators in challenging the assumptions that the physical architecture of the space should be a box, but was less successful in securing an interest in challenging the assumption that all surfaces should be white, and proposals for the use of colour only ever made it as far as the drawings. It is interesting to note that the proposals for the inclusion of colour were rejected in the design process. As my interest in challenging the status quo was presented via gentle advocacy—and not by instruction or stipulation—the curators were not presented with firm instructions that could simply be rejected. Because of this, colour remained on all design drawings and on construction drawings. By the time budget and time began to constrain the projects, the curators were completely emotionally and intellectually invested in the projects, and when asked to defend the projects to their managers, they did so with vigour. In each case, however, they defended the costs and time associated with the application of colour in only the most perfunctory manner.

In this sense, my role in the design process was to bring a group of people to take on a passion and for each of them to be prepared to fight for it.

Dying in Spite of the Miraculous (DISOTM)


Oncologia, Varini & Calderoni Collection Image by André Morin

Felice Varini using colour to bend space

Image by Lyons
In the case of DISOTM, the curators wanted to show nine projections in one space, which necessitated subdividing the space. However, even allowing for subdivision of the space, the number of projectors and the length of throw required by the various projectors, and how narrow the gallery was, meant that viewers of one film would need to stand in the projection path of another. In this I saw an opportunity. By finding a way to intersect the space allocated for viewing one work with the space allocated for viewing another, I was able to configure the space in such a way as to challenge the assumptions of the ‘white box’. This also gave me the opportunity to fit more works into the space than common sense would otherwise have allowed. To do this, the space would need to be configured, so as to create a logic whereby a member of the public looking at one work would be ‘within’ the work of another.

To achieve this, I drew on a device that I had encountered on a visit to the Vanderbilt ‘Gilded Age’ mansion on the Hudson River in New York State. There, I saw a birthing rail that Louise Vanderbilt had imported from France to embellish her bedroom with faux European opulence. The rail was originally designed for members of the French Royal family to lean on while congregating around the bed while the queen gave birth, to ensure that no last-minute switches were made and to confirm the verity of the genetic lineage. The original that the Vanderbilt Mansion rail was copied from can be found in The Queen’s Chamber in Versailles. This rail, rather effectively, though disturbingly, turns the place of birth into a stage. Through the disturbing concept of a ‘staged’ birth, the image of the rail had stayed
with me. However, I am also attracted to the fact that the Vanderbilt birthing rail was never needed, as Louise and Frederick Vanderbilt did not bear any children.

To lead audience members into the project path of an artwork other than the one they were intending to view, I designed an enclosed room housing a video work and a door leading to it. The room was, in fact, not enclosed, but only appeared to be so when approaching the door from outside. Once through the doorway, the space was revealed to be bounded only by dwarf walls. Over these they could see a number of works playing, in addition to the one playing in the ‘room’ in which they were standing. The audience also found themselves being watched by other audience members who were watching the film in the ‘room’ from outside of the dwarf wall boundary. Similarly, those watching from outside the dwarf wall found that the work they were watching included occasional real-life characters entering and leaving the space in which the film was being projected.

The curators, who had hoped that the simple walls I was proposing would somehow find a way to engage with their theme of lapsed hope in impossible worlds, were enamoured with this move, and with its disturbing origins. It had given each work the space it needed, placed the audience within the works, and allowed for the walls framing the exhibition to be part of the entire composite of the exhibition.

None of the curators had heard of a French birthing rail. Specific knowledge of either Vanderbilt Mansion, Versailles, or the birthing rituals of Marie Antoinette is required in order to be conscious of the existence of such a thing. What I have learned from this is that during the design process, I intuited a type of space that would be required to achieve a desired effect—pleasing both the curators and the brief to subvert traditional exhibition space. This intuiting came from specific knowledge of the birthing rail and, despite it being unlikely that this reference would have been obvious to any visitors to the show, the effect was manifest nonetheless.

This raises an interesting, and contested issue about the legibility of references. For a reference to be effective in a work, does it need to be recognisable in the work? When answering this question through the lens of DISOTM, the re-creating of the birthing wall has the same spatial effect as the original. It makes reference without a literal reproduction. The success of this design choice, whereby the subjects unwittingly find themselves as object and vice versa, relies on the audience being affected by the design without them being conscious that they have been. Imagine that the same decision was made and the reference made explicit by a plaque on the gallery wall, or that the wall I designed was an exact replica of the birthing rail in the looking over the dwarf wall
Image by the Art Gallery of NSW
Inside the chamber, the viewer is viewed.

Image by the Art Gallery of NSW.
The outside of the chamber
Image by the Art Gallery of NSW
Queen’s Chamber in Versailles. In either instance, the work would then become about something else – that is, about the language of eighteenth century interior design, or about the gender politics of watching a woman give birth in order to ensure that the lineage of the father is passed on to the child. While these are not without interest, in the context of this work they would distract from the content of the show.

This is interesting to consider in the case of OverLogo, where the reference to the image of the tram ticket is explicit, and in the case of Wattle Avenue House, where the reference to the image of Lake Mungo and the Paul Smith shirt is implicit. It is also interesting to consider the transition from the explicit to the implicit in my practice more generally and over a period of time, which is covered in the overarching essay.

The effectiveness of the implicit reference in the case of DISOTM gives rise to a clue about my work: while general awareness of birthing rails is scant, the effect of its reinstatement was palpable. This leads me to speculate about a collective unconscious spatial or image bank which it is possible to draw on to affect an effect.

Parallel Collisions

Parallel Collisions had a budget six times that of the DISOTM, and involved a larger group of artists. The challenge here was two-fold. Firstly, as with the previous project, there was a need to include discrete spaces for a number of artists which exceeded that of the number of rooms in the gallery. Secondly, there was a brief to create a route or journey through a gallery which, in its raw state, consisted of a series of large rooms with high ceilings, each connected to more than one other room through large portals.

One of the rooms was divided such that works by Pat Brassington, Ricky Swallow and Michelle Ussher could all be displayed. Each is a significant artist in their own right, and combining all three in one room was spatially and politically challenging. To achieve this, both spatially and politically, the walls of the ‘second gallery’ were arranged to imply that the space of each artist extended through the portal of the room and beyond. The room became a spoke for three larger galleries.

One of the more challenging works to incorporate was the work of the video artist Daniel Crooks. He liked the idea that the exhibition was being conceived of as a series of parallel journeys, but was insistent that his work be displayed in a light sealed box behind a curtain or a light trap, which effectively removed the work from the idea of a journey. To encourage him to part with the curtains, I asked for a preview of the work, and saw that it was a series of frames moving past the entrances of laneways, all seamlessly spliced together like a movie version of Ed Ruscha’s photographs of Sunset Strip. I proposed a design solution, which persuaded Crooks to abandon his insistence on a black space. How I came to this solution is of particular interest.
in the context of reflective practice research.\textsuperscript{9}

How does one observe an experiment, or design process, without affecting it? This is not a new question. Methods of dealing with this are covered extensively in the area of cybernetics, where an attempt to approach objectivity by having an observer observe the observer, who is in turn observing another observer, who in turn again is observing another and so on. But what if we were to simply allow the process of observation to affect the design process being examined?\textsuperscript{10}

The idea for how to design a room for Daniel’s work came from the idea of observing the observer. I proposed a room which was completely open at one end, past which the audience could walk. From the vantage point of walking past this space, you could watch a space occupied by people watching a movie which was itself a film depicting what would be seen by a viewer walking past another series of spaces. This idea also resonated with the very contemporary event of a Google Street view car capturing another Google Street view car, and also with Caspar David Friedrich’s famous painting from behind a man looking out over a view (about which I have always harboured the fanciful speculation that it is in fact a self-portrait, rather than a work about the death of a friend).\textsuperscript{11,12}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{12} Friedrich, Caspar David. 1818. Wanderer above the Sea of Fog. Oil on canvas. Hamburg: Kunsthalle Hamburg.
\end{flushright}
Robert Cook vs Max Pami's shelf
Image by Christian Capurro

The shield to Ricky Swallow's work
Image by Christian Capurro
Pat Brassington’s wall
Image by Christian Capurro
We used to talk about love

This exhibition included works by a series of artists which were all based in one way or another around the idea of love—sexual love, romantic love, platonic love, nostalgic love, parental love and forbidden love. I interested the curator in the idea that the overlap between the different types of love would be where its interest and contention lay, and I proposed that the work of each artist be linked to the work of two other artists via giant ‘glory holes’. Once scaled up, no discernible link to the ‘glory hole’ reference would be possible. But the idea proved too contentious for the gallery. The Franco and Amina Belgiojorno-Nettis and Family Contemporary Galleries (designed by the then government architect Andrew Anderson), in which the exhibition was to be housed, consist of four open-plan galleries, each rectangular in proportion and equal in size. Each gallery has nine pyramid form ceiling coffers with a skylight atop. The walls of the gallery are gapped-off from the ceiling by an architectural detail that draws the eye downwards away from the dramatic ceiling and towards the work. Nothing other than works of art had been installed in the gallery since its opening in 1988.

The approach agreed upon was to change the way the spaces were configured. The gallery is very familiar to its audience, and the idea was that the transformation of this familiarity into the unexpected would create a sense of loss, hope, or displacement. To do this, I proposed walls which would run uninterrupted all the way up to the skylights within the pyramid coffers. These walls would be set on a 45-degree angle to the gallery, rearranging the points to the intensely personal design method of my practice. More can be read about this in the chapter on Practicing in Kuala Lumpur and Qinghaugdao.

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Multiple versions of the scheme were drawn and discussed over the phone with the curator, and all were rejected. Designing with the curator remotely was not working, so a joint design session in the gallery was organised, and an agreement about how to begin to approach the design of the exhibition was reached. The difficulties of reading, engaging and communicating with the collaborators when working remotely justine Williams embeds her work in mine

Image by Christian Capurro

Design concept prepared after the fact Image by MvS Architects

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Design concept prepared after the fact Image by MvS Architects

love and forbidden love. I interested the curator in the idea that the overlap between the different types of love would be where its interest and contention lay, and I proposed that the work of each artist be linked to the
relationships between different parts of the exhibition, and I positioned it so that it brought the added benefit of making the mid-point of the exhibition’s journey visible from the entrance, but without allowing entry. Over the wall, a view of the ‘family love’ section of the exhibition, with works by David Noonan and Eliza Hutchinson. This preview was designed to give a glimpse of what might come from love, should you be brave enough to first engage with romance, the ecstatic, and the explicit (the exhibition sections that the view over the dwarf wall gave the viewer a preview of). This re-use of the same device that I used in DISOTM is an example of ‘chunking’, which is one of the design processes that I have observed in my practice, and which I discuss in the overarching essay. In this instance, the late (and automated) introduction of the idea resonated well with what the curator and I were trying to achieve. Moreover, she was familiar with my previous use of the dwarf wall and its Versailles origins.

Justene Williams began installing her work before the new gallery walls had been lined. Her work is cannibalistic and opportunistic, like mine. When she saw the walls in their unfinished state, she saw an opportunity to include them in her work in their raw state. By allowing her to do this, the boundary between the authorship of her work and mine became completely blurred, and this blurring created one of the most successful parts of the exhibition. Having left the pristine walls of the ‘family love’ section, Williams’ section is revealed as a glorious gothic mess and a moment that unpins the myth of the perfection of family love.15

The opportunity was presented to me to deny her request to interfere with construction of the walls that I had designed – and indeed it was assumed that I would. However, the transformation of the space was the key ambition of the design and that someone else had found an opportunity, where I had not, was something that I thought should be celebrated. This ‘soft’ authorship is an important part of the design processes that are being observed as part of this research. I described Williams’ work as cannibalistic, which I mean in a non-pejorative way. Mine is too, but in order for this method to be a positive and creative act, I must allow others to borrow from and interfere with my design processes, in the same way that I do theirs.
Justene Williams’ work embedded in the partially constructed walls
Image by Christian Capurro

View from Angela Mesiti’s work towards Paul Knight’s
Image by Christian Capurro
Looking from Angelica Mesiti’s work towards Darren Sylvester’s
Image by Christian Capurro
Looking at Justene Williams’s work over the internal dwarf wall
Image by Christian Capurro
Schooled into me by peers and mentors during my undergraduate years was the idea that the context surrounding the site of any given project has a far lower value than the intellectual and cultural domains that the architect brings to the project through their work. Ashton Raggatt McDougall’s scheme for the Sydney Harbour Competition proposed emptying the harbour itself. They contended that as Sydney had, to date, relied solely on the harbour to make it a great city, there was no incentive for it to become great in any other way. The best thing then, for its long term benefit, would be to drain the harbour. The design of a city when the site has no redeemable qualities would motivate the city’s designers to create a site, rather than simply responding to one.

In Wattle Avenue House, I set out to do just this. Mildura, in the far north-west of the state of Victoria, six hours drive inland from Melbourne, has a malnourished urban environment. The houses are mostly 1960s brick-veneer tiled-hip roof buildings. It has a population of 60,000 people, who live in sparse, rural, peri-urban and urban conditions, supported largely by an agrarian economy. Most of the Victorian and Art Deco buildings that were built have been demolished, with only a few remaining. Surrounded by depressed agricultural areas where struggling farmers are quick to sell up their land for subdivision to stave off bankruptcy, the urban boundary is constantly ballooning. Commissioned by a local celebrity chef and voracious

Wattle Avenue House
A prototypical dwelling for a celebrity chef in the inland city of Mildura

Ashton Raggatt McDougall’s drained Sydney Harbour
Image by ARM

A typical Mildura house
Image by Jan van Schaik
advocate for the region, Stefano de Pieri and I imagined a house made from the tenacious and outrageous wit that he and I share.¹

Designing Wattle Avenue House during the period of this reflective research provided me with the opportunity to examine: what I imagined would occur during the design process; the design process itself; the resulting design; the built outcome; and the telling of the story of that design afterwards. What I imagined would transpire did, but something else did too, which changed my learned attitude towards contextual input into my design processes.

I will pick up the story at the point where I was being served a meal in one family. They had been living just over the river in New South Wales on a waterfront property outside the built up environment of Mildura. They wanted to buy a modest existing house and add two rooms to it. Together we sought out a 1960’s timber-framed cream brick-veneer and red-tiled, hipped roof house typical of the area. The house that we found (on the corner of Wattle Avenue and 12th Street) was in such poor condition that the local real estate agent was advising it be demolished to make way for a new home. Instead, we decided to keep it and have a little fun with it.

What if, I thought, we treated the house as though it had heritage values, and restored it accordingly? The additional rooms could therefore be a fun and contemporary addition to a lovingly restored heritage building. By giving the building heritage qualities, we would be implying that Mildura’s vernacular had notable architectural and historical qualities in its own right – just as Stefano had done with ingredients of the dish he had served me in his restaurant.

The idea that the vernacular of any given built environment is something to be respected and treated as a source for inventing new models is not new, and my exposure to it can be traced to Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown’s book Learning from Las Vegas.² It is curious to note that the same mentors and peers who had schooled me in the ‘never visit the site’ vein of designing had also been students of this same book. The results of the learning had been adopted, but the not method. The ‘never visit the site’ method, which I had previously enthusiastically


subtlety and discrediting an important learning method in the act, is one that has validity—what to do if the site and content do not provide sufficient material?

In looking at Wattle Avenue House, it appears that what I have done is to preserve, restore and romanticise the vernacular by creating and placing something self-consciously of itself and its moment amongst it. I have deliberately and explicitly spliced the baggage of my own practice and its lineages with the grain of Mildura.

Firstly, the plan of the house began as a copy of a house designed by my father at 36 3rd Street Melville, Johannesburg (side note: Mildura is the only city in Australia to have streets in one direction, and avenues in the other—a Dutch model exported to South Africa, to the US, and from there to Mildura by the Canadian property speculators the Chafey Brothers). The 3rd Street House has a courtyard created by an extension which is, in part, a long and widened corridor. The design of the plan of the Wattle Avenue House began with such a corridor placed along its south-eastern boundary which connected the bedroom, study, library and living areas. The plan underwent changes as other pressures to bear upon the project; but thinking about the origins of the plan brings to attention the idea that the spaces that we have experienced we carry inside us, and they inform how we perceive space. Through examining the design process that came to pass in the creation of the house, it is clear that—in my case—my own experiences also populate the toolbox from which I design.

Also in this toolbox is an interest in applied mathematics. My exposure to this can be traced back to my internship at Ashton Raggatt McDougall in the late 1990s and early 2000s under Paul Minifie (now my co-director at MvS Architects). Paul’s interest in the application of applied mathematics to architecture is evident in Storey Hall and the National Museum in Canberra, both designed by Ashton Raggatt McDougall (I worked on the latter design while an undergraduate student). This same interest is evident in the Centre for Ideas at the Victorian College of the Arts and the Australian Wildlife Health Centre at Healesville, both by Minifie Nixon (I worked on the former design, and it has also been the subject of a separate reflective practice PhD by Paul Minifie). These interests continue in the work of MvS Architects, and in the instance of Wattle Avenue House, Paul peered over the shoulder of one of our employees who was struggling with the brief I had given her for detailing of the entry portico, and he suggested we try something else. The detail that Jessica In had been struggling with was how to get a four-sided asymmetrical diamond shaped tile to array across the convoluted geometry where the old and the new segments of the house met. The tile, Paul intuited, when arrayed three dimensionally, formed an Icosahedron which, when subtracted from the intersecting house segments, neatly solved the problem of all the intersecting geometries, and created an occasion for the tiles to be arrayed in a manner not previously used. I liked the idea. The shape had a playful quality, like a low resolution soccer-ball. Being inside it feels a little like being inside a big toy. This shape appears again in the Bowen Street façade of the RMIT New Academic Street project, currently in design development.

Another notion that becomes clear by examining the design process of Wattle Avenue House is the way that the works of other architects that I have never met—and on occasions whose buildings I have not even visited—haunt my practice by popping into my mind during a design process unexpectedly, like wildcard. Such an instance can be seen in the section through the main public area of the Wattle Avenue House that runs between the kitchen space and the living space where the design has to negotiate the very low cave of

Construction set-out for the entry portico (second version)
Image by MvS Architects

A drawing showing design intent

The first tiles being applied
Image by Jon von Schalk

Entry portico under construction
Image by MvS Architects

Inspired by region
House wins award

Wattle Avenue House in the local paper
Image by Peter Bennetts
Article published by Sunraysia Daily 15/08/12
Bruegelage Project 04 — Wattle Avenue House

View of the entry portico
Image by Peter Bennetts

The front door
Image by Peter Bennetts
the existing building. Having visited Frank Lloyd Wright’s Robie House in Chicago, I was confident that lowering the ceiling height to 2100mm at this point would serve to heighten the dramatic effect of the higher ceiling of the living space.8

The entry vestibule, the corridor between the living area and the master bedroom, the corridor leading to the media room and the corridor connecting the secondary bedrooms were all considered, planned and detailed as rooms in their own right. This way, the individual always moves from a room into an intermediary room before entering the next one – a technique copied from the John Soane Museum.9

The house is replete with witty notions and playful gestures. The original house is restored lovingly, while the addition leans against it in a typological pretend-copy of a lean-to. I had seen a caravan on a beach-side caravan park near Melbourne which had a lean-to built against it. The lean-to had become bigger than the caravan, which in turn had become a permanent, non-mobile, part of the house. This comical image fuelled the design process of the Wattle Avenue House.

The Wattle Avenue House’s façade is clad in portrait format untreated, fibre-cement sheeting. This in turn has a geometrically dramatic portico sculpted from it which is lined with glossy white textured Italian tiles. This portico protects a bespoke door, made from re-purposed mock-Victorian era architraves, from the elements. The use of these architraves is sort of a pun on the ‘heritage listing’ that we had given the house.

The door unlatched by twisting a digitally manufactured stainless steel door handle made by a Dutch designer (Peli Design). The handle, which we wished we had designed ourselves, exploits the errors of a 3d scan of a typical door handle. The handle is a caricature of the digital design and manufacturing process.10

Inside the house, the cascade of seemingly incoherent ideas continues. I have long been enamoured by Furness & Evans’ (sadly demolished) First National Bank of the Republic Philadelphia.11 The intense cramming of architectural forms and phrases onto this tiny facade ecstatically expresses the hope for architecture to be rich and complex, but also an instantly audible and comprehensible language. This project haunts me when I am composing ideas, and it gives me the confidence, in a manner very unlike cooking, to err in favour of more ideas, more often. This affection for witty and dense juxtapositions can also be seen in the Clyde Cameron Training College by Kevin Borland in Albury Wodonga.12

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undergraduate years, while also developing a way to blend this approach with the particular concerns of the context in which the project was sited. This bleeding is a key factor in why the clients are so proud of their house. They are proud that they occupy a dwelling designed by MvS Architects, but they are also proud that the design of the house is built from their stories as well as mine. This is an important insight into the way I work. In instances where I have not been able to do this, such as Café Bourgeois or the Qinhuangdao Super-yacht City Display Suite, the projects have ground to a halt.

The front of the house also went through a series of iterations—the last after the house was already under construction. The adoption of the ultimate iteration happened after an earlier version had already been documented and built and this earlier version had to be demolished in order to make way for the new design. This iterative design process is one in which we toggle between action and reflection on a regular basis. Development is never linear; it often happens in fits and starts. Sometimes we go back to earlier versions of something when we find that we like the most recent version less than the previous one.

Reflecting on these iterations and the decisions made throughout the changes, it becomes clear that during the process of designing Wattle Avenue House, I found a way to develop a rich and playful referential approach, consistent with the training of my

In the courtyard, a glazed brick wall cranks around the elbow of the courtyard running over the threshold of two large sliding glazed doors, and deep into the living space. In the outside area, brick represents a pixel of an image of a lake mungo, a nearby world heritage site at which the oldest human remains in Australia have been found. As the wall crosses the threshold, the pixelated image ceases to be rendered by the coloured bricks, at which point the colour—whichever colours of brick happen to coincide with the line of the glazed door—are then extruded as a series of horizontal stripes, ending only at the wall’s zenith inside within the living area. This is based on a image manipulation technique named ‘stretch edge pixels’, which takes a single line of pixels at the edge of an images and stretches them into a pattern, not unlike that used by Paul Smith in the design of his striped apparel. (I own one these shirts and wear it whenever talking about the house publicly.)

The pixels of the bricks do not configure to recreate the image, nor were they designed to, as there are not enough pixel/bricks in the wall, nor is there distance enough to stand back from it even if there were. The only way to know that the wall is a representation of Lake Mungo is to have been told, like the stories of the tribes of Mungo itself, which are passed between generations by word of mouth.

The design for this internal courtyard wall went through a series of iterations before the Mungo/Paul Smith shirt was settled upon. In them, the thinking about whether a literal or explicit approach would work best is revealed. The iterations were prepared in haste, then re-examined and contemplated slowly. This method of fast production followed by careful reflection is a method often employed in my design processes. It allows for thinking to occur through the pen in one or other of its forms—pen and paper, the model, drafted plans, rough virtual model and realistic rendering. At MvS Architects, we keep a bottle of white board cleaning fluid handy, as we often draw directly on to the screen over the top of a displayed image. This then gets photographed on a phone, and the screen cleaned.

The internal courtyard wall elevation Image by MvS Architects

The internal courtyard wall elevates Image by MvS Architects
Standing in the original house looking at the extension
Image by Peter Bennetts
Looking towards the internal courtyard from the living space

Image by Peter Bennetts
The internal courtyard

Image by Peter Bennetts
The original house and the extension as seen from the front garden
Image by Peter Bennetts
From the street the extension is mostly concealed
Image by Peter Bennetts
I have designed three tables over the period of this reflective practice PhD; one at the very beginning, one in the middle, and one was under construction at time of writing. It is instructive to examine each of them to gain insight into the changes in my practice over this period of time.

**Table Ray** was born after I was approached by an entrepreneur, of sorts, who wanted to invest in the prototyping of a table for mass-production. As it turned out, by ‘invest’ he meant emotional and intellectual investment—not financial—so the table remained on the drawing board on which it had been designed. At the time, my skills in the plastic manipulation of virtual surfaces, using Non Uniform B-Spline modelling software called Rhin3D, was reaching its zenith. The surface manipulation that was possible was so powerful, and so plastic, that any surface imaginable could be created. Many using this software were, and still are, creating surface diagrams that have nth degree variety, randomness and continuously variegated intersecting surfaces. However being a highly intuitive piece of software it is easy to reach a mediocre level of skill in using it, but quite difficult to master - much like playing the guitar.

Every tool has its tendency. A 2B pencil has a very particular way of sliding over a piece of paper leaving its trace as the paper wears away the graphite nib, all the while returning feedback to the hand by way of subtle vibrations created by the texture of the paper. A ball point pen has another sensation,
It was sad that a man had died, it was a great relief that his death had put an end to the Steve Irwin media machine. To make a neat story about the process of designing this table, I would like to say that Table Ray was designed as a monument to the animal that had brought to a timely end the media machine of Steve Irwin, but it is not what I observed taking place. Neat stories about design processes do have their place though, and you will read about the effect that post-rationalisation had on my design processes in the chapter on The Edithvale Seaford Wetlands Discover Centre.

As it glides effortlessly over the paper separated from it by the fine meniscus of the ink so perfectly leaking from its tiny shiny steel head—pausing only to break against the texture of the paper when the osmotic supply of its backup runs dry. Great pleasure can be derived from running either of these endlessly and meaninglessly over a piece of paper while reveling in the sheer ecstasy of their effect. But to draw is not merely to seek pleasure from the tendency that a pen has; it rather involves mastering its tendency, and controlling it to produce something that is more than the sum of the lines on the paper which receives its ink. One cannot make pencil-drawings without a pencil having been created, but a one cannot make a drawing by creating a pencil. The same analogy can be made with computer aided drawings software. The tendencies that computer aided drawing software have are almost endlessly fascinating. They are improved on—and added to—at an ever-increasing rate. And so an almost endless supply of curvy, freeform, floppy and glossy shapes and surfaces are continually being generated using these types of software, simply because this is the tendency of the tool. As the saying goes: “Why does a dog lick its balls? Because it can.”

Tragically enamoured by this new wave of surface benders, my entrepreneur wanted a bendy surface table. Cognisant that I was in the pencil/pen/guitar trap, it was very important to me to give him one shaped to an idea, and not simply the tendencies of the tools in which I was proficient.

Around this time, the Australian wildlife expert and TV personality Star Steve Irwin died, having been stabbed in the heart by the poisoned sting of a stingray. His death was widely reported as a ‘tragedy’. Germaine Greer, controversially, was vocal about the fact that, while it was sad that a man had died, that he had done so in willing pursuit of dangerous animals, suggested that his death should not attract sympathy. This debate interested me. I felt strongly that the media machine of Steve Irwin was a powerful limiting factor in how Australian culture was perceived globally, because it proliferated the idea that Australia is a crazy wilderness filled with crocodile hunters, when in fact it is one of the most urbanised countries in the world. In my view, Germaine Greer should have gone further and said that, while it was sad that a man had died, it was a great relief that his death had put an end to the Steven Irwin media machine.

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1 The Guardian. “That sort of self-delusion is what it takes to be a real Aussie larrikin.” http://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/sep/05/aus-tralia
originated as the front room of a home, where the items made by the home’s occupants, in the home’s rear quarters, were put on display for those visiting the house with a view to making a purchase. From this comes the tendency to keep the front room of the house formally arranged.

Her brief to me was to design a table that would simultaneously embody both conditions of domestic object and retail display. One might ask why a person, so skilled and practiced in the art of conceiving of and creating objects that she was, might need the input of another. Observing the process of designing the table provides an answer to this question.

The idea of a sandwich board—that crass and flimsy object of retail display—which could fold out to become a table suggested itself, again epiphany-like, and formed the basis from which the design developed. While I can pin-point no deaths of disliked world-famous television personalities caused by sandwich boards, there are sufficient instances of them in everyday life that no such speculation is required. This is exactly what I now observe to have taken place is the search for an idea upon which I could shape a table. Then, I thought I had hit upon the idea of a stingray without knowing why. I have never seen a sting-ray in the flesh. The only relationship that I have with this animal is the Steve Irwin narrative, and it is only now that I realise that this story must have brought the form of the animal to my consciousness as I was searching for a figure to become the table. At the time, the idea of the stingray was simply an epiphany, which was milked for what it could be; but nary a moment’s thought was cast in considering from whence the figure may have come.

A-Table was designed in collaboration with the artist Fiona Abicare (see also the chapter on Scandinavian Freestyle). Abicare came to me with a brief to design a table that could double as a display stand for a series of art works. Her practice is concerned with the relationship between domestic interiors and commercial display space. Her conjecture was that the shop-front originated as the front room of a home, where the items made by the home’s occupants, in the home’s rear quarters, were put on display for those visiting the house with a view to making a purchase. From this comes the tendency to keep the front room of the house formally arranged.

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approach to creating objects always began with theory, whereas mine began with whatever was most obvious or convenient—that is, do something/anything with it, and then from a theoretical point of view reflect on what had been done. A difference began to appear whereby intuition, on my part, was sufficient motivation to begin the act of design, or make an important design decision. On the other hand, Abicare’s approach required the carefully conscious articulation of the etymology of any act before its commencement.

Reviewing this design process leads me to speculate on a way of articulating my particular type of design practice. Art has the ability to invite reflection, simply by being labelled ‘art’. Andy Warhol showed us that a can of tomato soup in the kitchen is simply a can of tomato soup, whereas a can of tomato soup in a gallery is art and invites us to become aware of our everyday lives in a way that the can of soup in the kitchen cannot. Or, to put it another way: the can of tomato soup in the kitchen bears a burden of functionality. In order to be a can of tomato soup in the kitchen, it must in fact contain tomato soup. For a can of tomato soup to be an artwork, all that is required of it is that it be perceived as an artwork, and the most direct way to have it so perceived is to label it art by, for instance, placing it in a gallery.

Herein lies the real motivation behind Abicare seeking collaboration with me. The objects she is so skilled at conceiving and making are not objects why thinking of everyday objects as sources for design ideas is so enabling—there are so many, and they are all there waiting to be plucked from my unconsciousness.

However, this is not Abicare’s method of design and once again (as in OverLogo) the collaborative design process was heavy with conflict born of the two different sets of aesthetic languages around the production of objects. Abicare’s education, and approach, was highly theoretical. This is not to say that mine was not; but her
SK 10 Folding Elevations / not to scale

1/4 St Leonards Ave 0403 332 841   /   0411 724 427

Display Table  Fiona Abicare & Jan van Schaik

Table-A unfolding
Image by MvS Architects
Table A included in an artwork called Living Acts.
Image by Fiona Abicare.
With these added, the virtual A-frame was folded back to its ‘table’ position, and the points at which the just-added shelves intersected each other was mapped and the table then edited to avoid these collisions. This process was repeated a number of times until both Abicare and I were happy with the table and with the stand, and that neither part of the table-stand intersected with itself.

The table was introduced to the public in the form of a display stand in a show at Westspace entitled ‘Display Only’. Unlike Mr Schrodinger’s cat, A-Table cannot exist in both of its forms at any one time. Of course it may be in one state in one possible universe, and in another in the other, but it will never be known in both states in any one universe. That it was able to be both a stand and a table was only made known to the audience via a series of photographs showing its multiple states.

The table was introduced to the public in the form of a display stand in a show at Westspace entitled ‘Display Only’.

Eco-core Image by MvS Architects
Product by eco-core.com
points to, again, the way that design decisions disappear and resurface from a large collective pool of ideas. It’s interesting to note that I came across this material by accident some time prior to designing this table – probably as the result of falling victim to a product marketing campaign. This is an example of a wildcard impacting the design process without warning.

Plywood is a wonder-material. It has more strength than its weight would seemingly allow. It arrives in neat panels, does not warp and can be made waterproof with the right type of adhesive. Through lamination, it avoids some of the problems that timber has, while retaining much of the earthy textured lustre of wood. It is warm to the touch and can be laser or machine cut to create shape and detail. As its grain runs in all directions, it can be used without any orientation. Needless to say, architects love the stuff, and thus it suffers from overuse. It has lost its ability to be novel. Through Eco-Ply, I imagined a way to make it novel again—to make it curious. What I have understood about my practice from reflecting on this product is that one of the things I ask when deciding if something works or not is: Is it curious? Or does it inspire curiosity? Asking this question about curiosity is part of the process of designing things to seem strangely familiar. Its use in the café had been short lived, as the café was demolished soon after construction, and I was keen to bring it to life in another sustainable credentials that its name implies is nice, even important, but therein lays not the fascination. ECOply is a laminated plywood product. Lamination is a method of giving a material strength by fixing a number of layers to each other, like lasagne. To give even greater strength, the grain of each layer is aligned at ninety degrees to the layers below it. This is how standard plywood is made and works. When looking at the edge of a piece of plywood, the sandwiched layers are visible, while the large exposed surface is a single layer of wood. ECOply is made in the same way; but the laminations, rather than lying parallel to the surface of a panel, lie perpendicular to it. It makes no sense that such a panel would even be able to support its own weight, but the advances in adhesive technology have been so extensive that it can. This gives the material an embodied sense of the impossible. It seems to defy its own gravity and imply that it is not a sheet of wood, but a block. Also, rotating the plane of lamination by 90 degrees makes the large flat surface of any panel appear exquisitely ribbed—an endless surface of pleasure.

I had previously used the material in Café Bourgeois (see the chapter on this project for further reading) which
My father lives in an apartment with a pinball flapper floor plan. At the fat end is a small kitchen in which a rectangular table unnecessarily sits. It occurred to him to voice at a family lunch one day that the seating arrangements and the relationship between each guest and the space behind them would be better served if the table were oval. At that point, all my ECOply and Bridget Riley cake visions arose within me. I suggested to him that I had an idea about a design for an oval table, and the project began.

I initially pictured the table as egg-shaped. As with the late introduction of the Icosahedron in *Wattle Avenue House*, Paul Minifie saw the egg-shape that I was drawing, and suggested instead a super ellipse, from whence the table now gets its name. This method of collaboration, where key ideas are slipped in to the design process by someone who is not really working on the project, is an important way that we work. The two instances of Paul Minifie’s lobbing ideas in from outside the ring are covered in the *Wattle Avenue House* section and this one. An instance of me doing the same is covered in form.

I tried to use it again on *Wattle Avenue House*, but its costs were prohibitive. Also, I was keen make use of it in some sort of curved application, yet there was no opportunity for this in the house. This curved application, which I have now tested in virtual modelling software, creates a distortion in the striped edge grain as the grain gently turns the corner—as if accelerating like the pencils at the edge of Jessica Drenk’s work appears to do. Another everyday object that I am trying to embed a resemblance of into this table is a type of chocolate cake famous amongst Australian male bachelors, as the ‘cooking’ of it requires only that it be placed in the fridge overnight. The method involves whipping up a quantity of cream and using it as a cement to glue together into two parallel logs, piece by piece as if with mortar, two packets of dry round porous chocolate biscuits. These are then placed side by side and coated until buried in lashings of the same cream. The construction is then wrapped in tinfoil and shut away in the fridge overnight. As you sleep, the moisture from the cream seeps into the biscuits, binding the whole concoction together into one rather solid mass where the cold cream and the saturated biscuits have the same exact consistency. The pleasure of the cake comes in part from the eating—it is chocolate and cream after all—but it comes just as much from the cutting. The biscuits and cream become so intertwined overnight that the cake has no grain, yet the stark colour difference between the cream and the chocolate is retained. Whichever way the cake is cut, a striping is revealed. And if cut in a varied curving line, accelerating and decelerating stripes appear in a pattern similar to a Bridget Riley artwork. Let us call this the Bridget Riley cake. When I first saw an ECOply material sample, I thought it resembled a Bridget Riley work, or a chocolate ripple cake.
The legs of the table,  a mock-up of which hold up our board room table, are made of a series of pipes welded together, like the bunching of columns in Alvar Aalto’s Villa Mairea. The mock-up had three smaller pipes – simple, but elegant. Feeling that this was not curious enough, we decided to add three smaller pipes in an outer ring around the central ones. This led to the idea that perhaps the smaller pipes alone could make the connection with the table, the thicker ones touching only the floor. We liked this idea so much, that we added yet another row of pipes. The client quipped that the legs looked a bit Art Deco, which suggested to us that perhaps they were upside-down towers and that instead of there being a point where the pipes converged to meet the floor, there would be a miniature ‘satellite dish’ – a scaling down of a known object, rather than a scaling up. This was immediately appealing given our interest in Gulliver’s Travels.

In all these cases, the ‘lobbing’ of ideas into the design process of another team is one of the consistent ways that we worked. The table is made from one piece of ECOply, 650mm wide and 5m long. This peculiar dimension of a standard sheet meant that before cutting the super ellipse shape into the table, the length needed to be cut down and rebuilt into a more generically egg-like shape. This provided the opportunity to create a ‘feature’ in the middle of the table by reversing one portion of the strip. This created a ‘diamond’ shape where the grain would run in another direction. This featurism, which Robin Boyd dedicated himself to fighting, and which Ian McDougall (one of my mentors) has dedicated himself to reinstating, is part of the practice of generating curiosity that I have uncovered in my work.9,10


Bruegelage Project 05 — Three Tables

WELDED TO FIXING PLATE
SPOT WELD 5MM ROUND
M16 HIGH TENSILE BOLT
WELDED TO TOP PLATE
Ø22 SOLID ROUND BAR
M16 THREADED INSIDE
FELT FURNITURE FOOT
CS SCREW FIXING TO
Ø100 FIXING PLATE
Ø100 FIXING PLATE
TO TOP PLATE

3 - PLACES
3 - PLACES

BY OTHERS

412 17.5MM CHS 3 - PLACES
514 5MM ROUND BAR 12 - PLACES
403 10MM ROUND BAR 6 - PLACES
402 22MM ROUND BAR 3 - PLACES

6MM FIXING PLATE

178
1. Fixing plates 1 & 2 on 694mm P.C.D. measured from centre of rotated panel
2. Fixing plates 3 & 4 on 1003mm P.C.D. measured from centre of rotated panel

SHEET (96mm allowed for saw blade wastage)

SHEET BREAKDOWN. REJOIN FOR MAXIMUM STABILITY (glue and biscuit or similar)

SECTION A

TEMPLATE SETOUT

GRAIN DIRECTION

LEG FIXING PLATE SETOUT
Super Table in its apartment

Image by MvS Architects
Super Table - detail showing edge-grain.
Image by Peter Bennetts

Super Table showing some leg.
Image by Peter Bennetts
Super Table on its inaugural voyage.
Images by Peter Bennetts
Project 06 — The Keys to Mildura
In 2009, I visited Mildura for the first time as an adult and engaged in a discussion with Stefano de Pieri in his famous basement restaurant. We discussed the role that pride in architecture and the built environment can play in developing and sustaining culture-based economies. I learned of Mildura’s stalled architectural ambitions and uncovered a collection of postcards of bold and accomplished, demolished, colonial and art-deco buildings.

The town and its community appeared divided between those who view it as a place with a rich culture and history, and those who view its potential to be a complex and comprehensive bustling regional metropolis on the boundary of Australia’s most productive agrarian region, a support base for the agrarian industries that exist at the pleasure of the Murray Darling Rivers’ irrigation systems. On the one hand, we have Stefano’s Mildura; on the other, a version more akin to the bleak cultural landscape of colonial Australia as depicted in *Wake in Fright*.1

Drawn to these contradictions, set amidst a rich architectural history, I embarked on a project of drawing local council members, business owners, artists and educators into a dialogue about the role that pride in architecture and the built environment can play.

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in developing and sustaining culture-based economies.

Mildura, like many towns and cities of the same vintage, has a river to which access or visibility from the main urban areas is limited. At the time that the main land-subdivision was conceived, the river was a busy and noisy industrial highway. As such, it made good sense to keep the city close, but altogether separate from the river itself. As industry evolved to make use of other forms of transport such as road and rail, the river became quiet and beautiful again, with the potential to bring great benefit to the city should the two become connected more directly. This poses some difficulty for cities of this type, as a band of rail typically separates them from their rivers. In addition to this, Mildura has a very large flood plane with which it contends.

It seemed to us, then, that the most pressing order of business was the preparation of a master-plan for the Mildura riverfront. We set about the task of finding someone interested in commissioning us to prepare one. Early background research dredged up twelve previous master-plans—none of which had been acted on in any way. The problem was not the absence of a master-plan, but the absence of action. As the riverfront is so vast, we speculated that the size of it was perhaps the cause of inaction, as addressing the gap between river and city is a gargantuan undertaking for a city with a rate base of only 60,000 people. Instead, we decided to study recent examples where there had been action taken in Mildura, and extrapolate upon this as a model for further development.

One such site is the block bounded by Deakin Avenue, 7th Street, Langtree Avenue and 8th Street. This block bustles with people and businesses, a large hotel, university buildings and some beautiful—and gainfully occupied—examples of architecture dating back to the early 1800s. We speculated that, rather than try to expand this, perhaps more hot-spots of activity could be kick-started by the exposure that a public exhibition would bring—and through financial and policy support. We picked five disparate sites and proposed an urban agrarian garden on one, an archipelago on another, a complex of sporting buildings on the third, short-stay urban apartment accommodation with rural views on another and a vertical garden on an existing water tank on the fifth.

We then invited four other architects to choose Victorian towns of their own in order to speculate how architecture could play a role in the identity of each. I then exhibited the group—with the support of the Architecture Media and the Australian High Commission London—to the London Architecture Festival and Unlimited: Designing for the Asia Pacific festival in Brisbane.

What is instructive about the nature of my practice from the perspective of these five projects is that, while each is a designed thing, the sites chosen were not necessarily available for development, nor did any have a client, nor was there necessarily any demand for the programs contained within each scheme. Instead, these projects involved simply advocating for such a thing
Mildura presented in new light by top architects

By Kunvish McCarty

Originally published by Sunraysia Daily, Mildura
Wednesday, June 30th, 2010

The city’s visual identity is being transformed, with the help of top architects and designers, into a modern, vibrant and welcoming place.

The design team, led by world-renowned architects, have come together to create a vision for Mildura that will impact the city’s image and attract visitors from around the world.

The new design focuses on enhancing the city’s natural beauty and historical heritage, while also providing modern amenities and infrastructure.

The architects have incorporated the city’s rich agricultural history into the design, creating a strong connection between the past and the future.

The project is expected to be completed within the next two years, with the city’s key landmarks and public spaces being transformed.

The project will also create new job opportunities for local residents, as well as boost the local economy.

The architects are now working on the final stages of the design, with a presentation scheduled for the end of the month.
to exist. Their purpose was to generate the demand for the projects. Hence, the importance of exhibiting them in London, Brisbane and subsequently in the local tabloid newspaper under the headline “Mildura presented in new light by top architects”. In comparison to advocacy through governance and through writing, or even advocacy through owners’ corporations, here, I have engaged in advocacy through architecture.

Each project has a distinct formal, spatial, textural and graphic language—all of which was generated under extreme temporal and resource constraint. To do this, a series of familiar and everyday objects were drawn on, and then abstracted slightly, in order to give viewers an implicit sense of being familiar with them—much the same way that a smell has the ability to give you a strong sense of recollection, without clearly revealing to you the object of recollection. In contrast to Anthony Vidler, who understood this type of strange familiar/not familiar condition as being unsettling, I see it more as unconscious epistemological Velcro: that is, a thing that binds us to it without our awareness. These objects—an argyle sock; a lemon juicer; a hyper-cube—are all of a scale and a place that have nothing to do with Mildura, but have everything to do with things and places that might be familiar to the broadest possible selection of people. If these references were to be explicit—rather than subtly folded into the project—then the broad appeal would make for a global and generic architecture. We wanted to try to design something that people would feel a curious connection to. As such, we chose an approach whereby an implicit connection was experienced. These objects were then tested against known types of buildings, from no particular location, to get a sense of how they might evolve into built form. To get these to make sense as curious objects, and as projects that had an impression of being physically possible, a series of iterations were produced through drawing, 3D modelling and mark-ups. In order to advocate for something to come into being, an image and drawings of a resolved design are powerful tools to have. This art of making something look like it is resolved, without actually resolving, is similar to the techniques involved in the design of the LGM master-plan and Qinhuangdao Super-yacht City.

This methodological practice, whereby advocacy is an implicit aspect of design, is additionally a significant part of my teaching practice. As part of this building of community pride through design, I have run design studios in Mildura called ‘Population Mildura’, ‘Base Mildura’ and ‘Solar Mildura’. These were experimental design workshops which took place in the town and which were designed to raise awareness of the city amongst the wider community in Mildura. The first studio experimented with ways to re-design the city to attract a population of twice its size to relocate there. The second looked at adaptive re-use of an abandoned, heritage listed Art Deco building that was once the local hospital.

Finally, the third looked at creating...
Bruegelage Project 06 — The Keys to Mildura

Keys to Mildura development sketches
a Mildura-specific architectural language based on available solar power generating technologies as a way of re-branding Mildura as a Solar City, as opposed to an agricultural one. You can read more about how these studios tie into my practice in the chapter on teaching and advocacy.

Ultimately, this chapter of work led to the Wattle Avenue House commission. The principles that these curricula were designed around, and the principles of the Keys to Mildura project became embodied in the design of the house. You can read more about this in the section on Wattle Avenue House.
A productive garden around the water tower and an 'Opera House' / 'Lemon Squeezer' roof below.

Image by MvS Architects
An archipelago on the Mildura waterfront

Image by MvS Architects
Project 7 — Practicing in Kuala Lumpur and Qinhuangdao
By examining this project, I have learned something about the way in which I collaborate, about the problems and opportunities of working in locations remote from Melbourne, and how the use of the literal representation informs my design processes in my practice.

This collaboration was with Indra Ramanathan of iPartnership Malaysia, who after graduating from RMIT University, returned to his home country to run the KL Woods Baggott commercial interiors practice which he bought from the previous owners when they relocated to Hong Kong some years later. In 2012, Ramanathan’s increasing interest in pursuing architectural commissions crystallised in a visit back to Melbourne to seek a collaborator rooted in the strong design culture of the area - a relationship he had kept alive, at least in part, through his relationship with his RMIT University thesis supervisor Leon van Schaik. By collaborating with a Melbourne practice he planned to expand the burgeoning culture of design in Kuala Lumpur.

Having interviewed a number of Melbourne firms, he invited MvS to merge folios with iPartnership and pitch for some work. Together, we pitched for a sporting complex; a waterfront development; a hotel complex; a 100,000m² retail and residential complex for PKNS; the state development authority; primary and secondary school buildings for the Alice Smith School; and a master-plan for Lembaga Getah Malaysia (LGM)—all within the period of a year. Of these, we won commissions from PKNS (on hold awaiting development partners), the Alice Smith School (both now designed, documented and under construction) and the master-plan for Lembaga Getah Malaysia. It is interesting to observe...
that many of the commissions that MvS Architects have had since it began (as MNA) in 1999 have been in conjunction with other architects. This allows us, and often those we collaborate with, to keep our practice manageable small, while at the same time undertaking large projects. It also means we are able to engage in dialogue around the architectural culture and philosophy of another practice.

Upon reflection, I have observed that sometimes this works, and sometimes it does not. When it works, it is due to a robust exchange of ideas. For this to work, both firms need to be able to verbally articulate the nature of the creative engines within their design processes, the lineages that underpin these, and the assumptions, or short-cuts, that need to be made during the design process when producing work at fast pace.

Collaborating with practices who have different ways of designing, and different ways of talking about design is challenging, and not always successful. They don’t always work. Sometimes the collaborations work because one firm is simply happy to acquiesce to the other, such as when the division of labour involves one firm taking on most of the design responsibilities, and the other firm taking on most of the administrative responsibilities. Sometimes they don’t work at all.

I have observed that the process of reflection, and making explicit the assumptions underpinning my own design processes has made these types of collaborations far more productive.

In the case of the collaborations between MvS Architects and iPartnership, there is, I realise, a curious twist to how these collaborations work. While MvS Architects takes responsibility for the majority of the design content, it is Ramanathan, in most cases, who presents the designs to the clients, and gathers their feedback. It is Ramanathan who must answer the questions: Why does the building look like this? Why is this architectural language relevant to the needs and ambitions of our organisation? These are important, but tricky questions to answer when talking about one’s own work, and all the more tricky when answering on behalf of someone else. Ramanathan is a spectacularly persuasive person who draws on his remarkable powers of charisma, enthusiasm, empathy and charm when communicating to others. He could, as the saying goes, sell snow to Eskimos. The collaboration with iPartnership has been our most consistent and productive partnership with another architecture practice to date, even though the design ideologies of the two practices are not obviously aligned. iPartnership is a practice specialising in commercial interior fit-out design, and MvS Architects is a practice specialising in the design and content-based architecture more often associated with educational projects and public buildings. The two practices are still learning to speak each other’s languages.

In a recent project review of our recently completed parent’s centre for the Alice Smith School at Jalan Belamy, KL, it was remarked that...
this building was a joint project between two practices with very different pedagogies that had never worked together before, collaborating across a large geographical split, working in different time zones and administering a contract for a building that was designed from experience gathered in the constraints and habits of the Australian construction industry. Given this lists of firsts and constraints, the project is a remarkable achievement.

There is much Chinese Whisper in this learning process which, rather than being frustrating, has in fact become a very productive part of the design process. On a number of occasions, MvS Architects have designed something under intense time constraints in our offices in Melbourne; Ramanathan has then had to download the designs from our servers and attempt to develop a fluency in their extent, motivation, ambition, subtlety and foible while driving to the client meeting. Then—with this most cursory period of preparation only, and perhaps a brief long-distance phone call—he will proceed to present a design to the client with utmost certainty and confidence.

In examining my own design process, it is very instructive to consider the changes that a design undergoes in the following sequence: the initial ideas > my articulation of these ideas to the MvS Architects team > the MvS Architects team’s interpretation of the ideas > the drawings and slides prepared by the team > my feedback and the team’s response to this feedback > the submitting of this slide show to

Indra Ramanathan > Ramanathan’s interpretation of this slide show > my description to him of what the slide show is intended to communicate > his interpretation of what I have said > his description of this slide show and my description to the client > their interpretation of what he said about what MvS Architects has designed > the questions that the client puts to Ramanathan > his answers to their queries > the changes to the design he offers to the client in order to satisfy their questions > his description of those changes to me and the MvS Architects team > our interpretation of that description > the changes the MvS Architects team makes to the design based on the feedback from Ramanathan. Over the period of designing the administration buildings and parents’ centre for the Alice Smith School, for example, this whole process was repeated a number of times.

In any communication there is room for misunderstanding. In conversation, or when listening, drawing and presenting that drawing for review, this is easy enough to correct. But once the misinterpretation of our proposal is presented to the client, Ramanathan’s interpretation of the design’s etymology becomes set in concrete—at least for a time. Rather than being frustrating, as one might imagine it to be, this is in fact a very productive and surprising addition the design process. Here, the misinterpretations are in fact the very method by which the very different cultures of the two offices, and the cultural context of our clients and their projects, are meaningfully intertwined. Also, it has proven to be a powerful tool for generating a curious element to the work—an important part of my design practice, which you can find more examples of in the chapter on Wattle Avenue House and The Keys to Mildura, and which is covered in depth in the overarching essay.

This ‘Chinese Whisper’ design process is how the Alice Smith School was designed. It worked well, as there was a high level of trust, and shared interest in design, between the client and the architect. This same method is how we started designing the Lembaga Getah Malaysia (LGM) Master-plan. However, with a far more complex and bureaucratic client, with whom there was no pre-existing relationship and who had little interest in design, this
designed to service minimum speeds of 100kmh. In part, this method of planning is related to land-tax law in Malaysia, where the amount of land tax due is related to the number of uses assigned to a portion of land, and this tax zoning must be defined before a development permit can be granted; in part too, this method is related to a planning mentality that dates back to the English occupation of the country which ended in 1957.

Design sign-off within Lembaga Getah Malaysia is entirely in the hands of one person: the LGM Director General. LGM is effectively an autocracy. We were completely unprepared for this, as LGM has a management structure that appears to function like a democratic bureaucracy. The result was that a master-plan that we had carefully shepherded through layers of advisors and technical approvals was dismissed by the director general with the wave of her hand.

"I don’t like it”, she said.

When we asked her what exactly she did not like, and why, so that we could amend our design to seek her approval, she said:

“You’re not listening to me. I told you: I don’t like it.”

With the previous three months’ work discarded, we arranged for a private meeting with the Director General and began a relationship with her alone from scratch. Her expectations of what the design should be were myopic. All buildings were required to be based on a literal interpretation of some element of rubber. This could be a rubber tree, the chemical diagram of rubber, a rubber tree leaf, the small buckets that hang from rubber trees to collect their sap, a rubber tyre – even prophylactics. This highly literal approach to design was disconcerting for iPartnership, however, it was very familiar territory for us. It has been, in various ways, a part of our practice for some time. Paul Minifie’s techne trouve is about finding methods from other disciples and re-using them in a highly literal way.1 In OverLogo, we made a very literal scale model of a tram ticket. In Wattle Avenue House, we used an image of Lake Mungo in the courtyard wall, albeit in a slightly abstracted way, and an Icosahedron as the entry portico. However, as discussed

The project delivery partner (PDP) had already developed a land use plan and a construction delivery program before MvS Architects + iPartnership were engaged. The land use plan was firmly rooted in the 1950s model of development through zoning. According to the land use plan, the site would be raised to the ground, and then large segments would be assigned commercial, residential, recreation, educational and scientific use. Each was helpfully designated by a primary colour and separated by a six lane road

process quickly fell apart, and we had to travel to Kuala Lumpur in person.

LGM own substantial tracts of rubber plantation. Recently, a portion of this plantation adjacent to Kuala Lumpur has been sold for development of the western edge of Kuala Lumpur. LGM retained a portion of this for construction of a their headquarters, in which they plan to house a rubber research facility, an interpretative centre, a 30,000m² office building for their own use, a rubber college and a hotel, a convention centre and a small number of commercial development lots.

Hevea Tower, plan form genesis
Images by MvS Architects

1. OverLogo.
in the overarching essay, the use of literal representation in my practice has evolved into a blended use of borrowed objects.

In this instance, the use of the literal representation was familiar territory, but one that I had developed into something else in my practice. The move back to it was made for pragmatic reasons designed to build up our relationship with our client. Her interest in a literal representation of rubber-ness in the architecture of her project was so complete that in its absence she was unable to engage in discussion at all. Our willingness to engage with it opened up territory where we could discuss aesthetics, scale, composition, rhythm, symmetry and other elements of formal and architectural language. All we had to do was speak about whatever we chose to do in terms of rubber-ness.

This brings out an insight into the use of language in my design practice, which I have previously spoken about in a published interview with Jil Garner. Taking the example of the design of the Hevea Tower: when I spoke to the Director General about one of the buildings in the LGM Master-plan, I used a vocabulary related to rubber to describe our ambitions for the design, the issues being addressed and the design process in general. When I described this same building to the planning authority, I used a language of building heights, local vernacular, floor to area ratios and cultural heritage. When I described it to my MvS Architects staff, I used one of architectural reference, mathematical readings of space, and feeling; that is: Do we like it? Does it feel right?

This need to translate a design process—and a design—into multiple languages, is one of the keys to the success of a project; for without this, key members of the project’s constituents will fail to comprehend its significance, and will have no will or energy to fight for its manifestation—just as the curators in all three gallery projects had no will to fight for the use of colour that I was so keen on. You can read more about this in the Three Exhibitions section.

More interesting is the need to make sense of the project in multiple languages, and how this has an effect on the design process and its outcome. In order for multiple readings of something to be possible, there needs to be some root of this multiplicity in the original. For example, the over-scaled rubber collecting bucket at the front of the Hevea tower was described to the LGM Director General as a rubber collecting bucket; to the Project Delivery Partners engaged to manage the design and construction process, it was described as an awning over the drop-off; to the local planning authority, it was described as a rainwater collection area; and amongst the design team, it was referred to as the ‘Oscar Niemeyer bowl’. In order for it to be accepted as all of these things, it must have some of the qualities of all these references, and this collection of related, but different constraints is what defines how it will ultimately come into existence.

Another example of this can be seen in Wattle Avenue House, where the entry portico was described as a reference to the grotto in St Joseph’s College over the road (where the client had been schooled as a child), as a rain-shelter for the front door to the local planning authority, and as an icosahedron fragment amongst the design team. The use of translation into multiple languages is explored further in the overarching essay.

The LGM master plan, having been submitted and adopted by LGM and the local planning authority, moved...
Lembaga Getah Malaysia Master-plan views of the Heveas Tower, the Rubber College, the Research Facility and the Convention Centre

Image by MvS Architects
quickly into a commission to design and document one of the six building complexes in the master plan—The Hevea Tower Complex.

It is instructive to examine the design process of my practice in the master plan phase and then in the design phase of the same project. During the master plan phase, six precincts were designed to a planning level. However, there was a contractual requirement to produce a series of realistic and animated images. This meant that the buildings needed to be designed. Five weeks is not long enough to resolve the design of six building complexes. As a result, the buildings were designed to look as if they were resolved. This same technique can be seen in the design of the Qinhuangdao Super-yacht city master plan. To do this, things that have the aesthetic of resolved buildings are applied like the fake street in the film Blazing Saddles.

In the case the LGM master-plan, objects that were related to rubber were heavily used to develop the language of the architecture, as these were our key to the client’s interest. In The Qinhuangdao Super-Yacht City, there was no such easy key, so everyday objects were used, like a pair of pants, a honeycomb, a chequered flag and a cake tin. We considered using Chinese objects, but our knowledge of Chinese culture is not sufficient to make this work. The size of the sample of objects that were Chinese that we could draw on was too small. We initially imagined basing a building on a dragon, for example, but later rejected this idea. A Chinese architect coming to Melbourne and designing a museum in the shape of a Kangaroo, we felt, would seem condescending to us, and we were wary of doing a similar thing.

What is interesting about this method of design (where something is designed to look like it works, as opposed to actually working), it turns out upon reflection, is that it is part of our everyday design process. It is not possible, during design, to solve all elements at once. However, to focus only on one aspect will mean that while one portion of the project will become resolved, the relationship of this portion to other portion will remain unresolved—even if those other portions have themselves been resolved. One way of getting around this dilemma is to design a number of elements to a point where they look like they work, then focus in on one and start to actually resolve it. Having something appearing to be resolved is an effective way of making a placeholder relevant to the elements around it. An example of this is the core in the Hevea Tower plan. The resolution of a building’s core requires the resolution of a complex set of interrelated problems: lift passenger numbers, size of service risers, construction methodology, fire services, building pressurisation, leasing efficiency and more. At this stage of the design process, none of these can really be tested, yet the core, as shown in the current plan, ‘looks like’ it has been resolved. This has allowed us to concentrate on the design of the column layout, floor plate, façade and building form. As the design progresses, closer attention gets directed towards the core, at which point it will become clear that while it looks like it does work, in fact it does not. It is subsequently designed to look like it works under a more detailed scrutiny, and once it does, more detailed examination is turned back to other elements. As we keep going deeper and deeper into this process, there begins the ceasing of a difference between something looking like it works and something actually working. There is evidence of this is the submission entry drawings for OverLogo, where the project needed to appear feasible, but could not possibly have been fully resolved. This technique is also covered in the overarching essay under the heading ‘Fake it ‘til you make it’.
Bruegelage

Hevea Tower progresses over time between client, MvS Architects & iPartnership
Images by MvS Architects
Project 8 — Sugar Station
I joined MvS Architects (née Minifie Nixon Architects) as a director in 2007, after working with them on (and winning) a competition for one of the five lots on the CUB development—now Swanston Square. We were engaged to undertake (and we have since completed) a schematic design for an 11-storey 1,200m² floor plate building on our site. This came to a close in November 2008, and the design development was slated to follow immediately. As the world’s economy took a tilt towards uncertainty—known as the Global Financial Crisis—the project was put on hold. At the time of writing, it still is.

The MvS Architects business plan was to design and document a large mixed-use tower, and with this project in our folio, pursue more similar commissions. Instead, we found ourselves without that commission and running a practice in an environment where levels of competition within the industry for any type work were suddenly extremely high—even if we could claim to have the experience in undertaking such a project. Competition for the type of projects in which MvS Architects were strong increased suddenly, and large firms started to buy any form of work they could in order to feed their workforces.

Thus began a period at MvS Architects where we pursued a type of client who had never engaged architects before. In other words, being unable to compete in the existing market, we set out to generate a new one.

Sugar Station
A chain of confectionery stores and a brand

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A chain of confectionery stores and a brand

I joined MvS Architects (née Minifie Nixon Architects) as a director in 2007, after working with them on (and winning) a competition for one of the five lots on the CUB development—now Swanston Square. We were engaged to undertake (and we have since completed) a schematic design for an 11-storey 1,200m² floor plate building on our site. This came to a close in November 2008, and the design development was slated to follow immediately. As the world’s economy took a tilt towards uncertainty—known as the Global Financial Crisis—the project was put on hold. At the time of writing, it still is.

The MvS Architects business plan was to design and document a large mixed-use tower, and with this project in our folio, pursue more similar commissions. Instead, we found ourselves without that commission and running a practice in an environment where levels of competition within the industry for any type work were suddenly extremely high—even if we could claim to have the experience in undertaking such a project. Competition for the type of projects in which MvS Architects were strong increased suddenly, and large firms started to buy any form of work they could in order to feed their workforces.

Thus began a period at MvS Architects where we pursued a type of client who had never engaged architects before. In other words, being unable to compete in the existing market, we set out to generate a new one.
In the context of this research, this provides an opportunity to examine our methods of extolling the value of architecture to unreceptive ears, and how in some instances, those ears have become receptive, while in other instances they were not.

Sugar Station is a confectionery company that wanted to develop a chain of stores, with a view to listing the company for public investment. To do this, they recognised that they needed a brand, but had no interest or intention in expressing this brand through the fit-out of their stores. By building a link between the roles that architecture could play in creating brand, I interested them in commissioning MvS Architects to design their stores. Given this connection, they also sought my advice on the design of their corporate identity. I advised engaging a graphic designer, and one was subsequently employed.

The clients, skilled though they were in human resource management, funds management and logistics, brought to the table an illiteracy in the language of aesthetics, colour, form, geometry, space, graphics, materiality and fabrication—all commonly discussed issues in any design commission. Such inexperience was unfamiliar to me, having had little experience communicating with people outside of the architecture, art and design industries in my upbringing, education and professional experience thus far. By building trust at a personal and non-design level, I was able to gain their confidence and began—albeit painstakingly—to translate the language of a design process into one to which they could relate, something the graphic designers were less able to do, being accustomed to more design literate clients. They were unable, perhaps willfully, to translate the nature of their art into language that could be understood by the clients. Out of sheer necessity, I became the interface between the brand designers and their clients.

It is instructive to compare the brand designers’ approach to ours. For them to be able to engage with their client, they needed the whole scope of the commission to be within their control. Conversely, the scope for the development of a unique architectural language for a shopping centre kiosk is in fact quite limited. There are limitations to scale and budget, naturally, but there are also the constraints of the centre management design managers who have a tendency to want to assert their own design agendas before approving drawings for construction. In the same way that many security guards sometimes abuse their power, as they are often frustrated policemen, centre design managers whose approval I have sought have consistently abused their power—as if frustrated designers. Also, the Sugar Station kiosks, in order to be able to generate sufficient income to service the lease, need to be crammed to its entirety with product. By the time all these issues are taken into account it can be impossible to imagine how any value can be added through architecture.
Sugar Station at the Southlands shopping centre

Image by MvS Architects
However, despite these constraints, we only knew how to go about preparing a set of documents for approval and construction by engaging in a design process. We studied an existing Sugar Station kiosk (designed by someone else), unpacked the logistical structures of the business, and reverse engineered the centre management’s design guidelines until we became fluent in them.

In reflecting on what we did with this information, it becomes clear that our manipulation was more akin to a landscape painter skilfully mixing paint than an engineer solving a problem. In the painting, while the technique of mixing the paint is critical, it is not the ability to mix colours that the painter is expressing. The painter is expressing a concept of what they feel or think. Similarly, the paint has certain physical constraints. It must be allowed to dry, or not, before another layer is applied, depending on the desired results, and it must have a certain makeup if the painting is to last a long time. The magic of a painting is to experience the emergence of an image from the mundane act of applying paint onto a canvas with a brush.

What I have observed myself doing is treating each physical, technical, budgetary, legal or other constraint or problem as an opportunity to express something, not as a thing to be resolved, avoided or hidden. Such an approach, in the case of Sugar Station, was to impregnate each mundane design solution regarding the kiosks with a relevance to the ambitions of the company’s brand.

This manifested in the design of the skirting around the edge of the kiosk. As stipulated by the centre design guidelines, these should be made from a highly durable surface and offset inwards from the outside line of any joinery unit, and should be 200mm high. This constraint is stipulated in response to a need for centre floors to be cleaned by industrial cleaning equipment without causing visible damage to the joinery, which—if it ran un-impeded to the floor—would be scratched and scarred on a nightly basis. Instead of recessing the skirting, however, we expressed it, creating a small shelf. This effect gave the impression that each joinery unit was sitting on a plinth, while the usual inset skirting detail gave the joinery units a sort of teetering effect. By designing the Sugar Station kiosks in this way, and by rolling this detail out across their stores, we were able to express a confidence and muscularity of purpose in their architectural language that no other kiosk has.

We used a similar strategy to design our way around the pop-corn machine/fridge dilemma. Both are key money spinners for the business. The ideal fridge is tall. This makes it visible, which increases sales. A short fridge can be custom made, but this brings excess costs and reduces the visibility of the product. The pop-corn machine must be raised as its product can only be extracted from its base, and to lower it would create an open food source too close to the floor—in contravention of the food preparation laws—and would also create ergonomic stress for the staff operating it. Centre management regulations stipulate that only one item in the entire kiosk may protrude beyond a height of 1200mm above the floor level. Financial modelling of the kiosk without either the fridge or the pop-corn machine showed removing either would make the kiosk un-viable. We applied to centre management for

Hiding the popcorn machine behind a ‘paper bag’

Images by MvS Architects
an exemption from their regulations, arguing that the joinery unit within which the popcorn machine was housed should be designed as an up-scaled paper retail bag—a strategy used in other design projects, such as OverLogo. As a matter of strategy, we sold this idea to them before indicating that the ‘bag’ would break their height limit. Once enamoured with the idea of a kiosk artfully representing a treasured vehicle of sales mechanisms, they were little interested that an abrogation of constraints was required for its proposed existence.

The main product of Sugar Station is a series of acrylic boxes that contain loose confectionery. Customers serve themselves using buckets and scoops provided, and then take their loot to the check-out where it is weighed and paid for. These boxes of confectionery are particularly beautiful. Our big design move in regards to the kiosk was to have one long wall of just these acrylic boxes so as to separate them from the other material that is sold, which is less visually appealing. To allow the colourful confectionery to be seen on the non-serving/mall side of the kiosk, we began to design holes in the rear of the wall. We created more and more and before long the wall began to look like a city skyline. Unlike the metaphor of the giant shopping bag, or the giant tram ticket in OverLogo, this metaphor arose by accident—the image of a city skyline appeared as a result of what we were doing, not as a result of our intention. This idea of the kiosk as a city became the way that we referred to this confectionery wall amongst ourselves. There was no mileage on proliferating the idea of a city of confectionery to our client as they had no interest in city-ness—it bore no relation to their business or their brand. But it was important to us to have this metaphor as a design tool, as it gave the task meaning to us and to those who would see it and use it—whether or not they understood the metaphor. The Sugar Station kiosks are interesting in this context, as it is possible to observe the use of explicit referencing, as in the shopping bag, and also the design through implicit reference to objects. Both of these design strategies are covered in the overarching essay.

In the case of the Sugar Station kiosks, of which there are ten, nine have been designed by MvS Architects. We also developed a family of strategies which have been applied to the entire chain. The initial idea, and fee proposal, was to design only one, and have it repeated as required—as if with a rubber stamp. However, each site has such difference in size, orientation and context that this never came to pass. Instead, what became standardised was a design process. This process was then habitualised, but in such a way that this habit could be interrupted in order to incorporate the new and different constraints of each new site. By observing this same design process over and over for the same store and client, but in slightly different circumstances, it became clear that there was a type of chunking going on. As pointed out in the introductory essay, ‘chunking’ is a name given to the way that our brain learns complex tasks, such that it can compress them for efficient re-use, but still allow them to be interrupted or added to when needed. The idea of chunking as a method of my design practice is evident in all the project types that we work on repeatedly, and it is covered at length in the overarching essay.

An early sketch for the ‘city skyline’ wall of the Sugar Station kiosk at the Southlands shopping centre

Image by MvS Architects

The city skyline

Image by MvS Architects
The Sugar Station shop at Northlands shopping centre
Images by Albert Comper
The Sugar Station shops at the lower level of Southern Cross Station (below) and Elizabeth Street (above)

Images by Albert Comper

The Sugar Station Shop on the upper level of Southern Cross Station

Images by Albert Comper
What emerges after reflecting on the experience of meeting the client, the process of designing the fit-out and witnessing the project’s life beyond completion is that it was a catastrophic failure at every level, with the exception of our use of the architecture photograph. From the hindsight provided by this practice-based research, it is clear that this project tested the limits of an image-based approach to design.

In 2009, MvS Architects were introduced to a barista. Melbourne’s central suburbs are famous for their baristas. Most are from New Zealand, have beards they have not earned, and drive fixed wheel bicycles with hand-made leather seats. Annoyingly predictable, yes, but absolute masters of ‘cool’—in both personal style and also how to ooze an atmosphere in which people just want to hang out and drink endless chai-decaf-double-strength-half-skinny-soy lattes. And the coffee they make is good. For any café owner, they are a bankable commodity.

The barista we were introduced to was not one of these. Mickey, not his real name, was clean-shaven, buff, and doused in bargain cologne—just expensive enough not to be recognised as cheap. Mickey had earned the title barista by pulling coffees in the Alfred Hospital Café, run by a large commercial catering company. His knowledge of the subtleties of coffee extended only to the vast number he could pull in an hour. By day he pulled and pulled coffees and by night he did sit-ups, saved his wages and poured over Donald Trump’s bible How to Get Rich. Mickey was bristling with commercial ambition and, courtesy of Mr Trump, had a crystal clear vision of how to make his ambitions manifest. The ‘bible’ had told him to take his personal skills, turn them into a brand, and then scale them up. The ‘bible’ had told him to take no prisoners. The ‘bible’ had told him to never let anyone dissuade him from his vision. Mickey was starting a café chain!

The chain, he had decided, was to be called Café Bourgeois. Its logo would be known to all - up in lights like the

Cafe Bourgeois
A catastrophic failure

it for $9,000. This was how badly we needed a client. Mickey began to yell. I distanced the receiver from my ear only just in time:

I TOLD YOU, THIS IS NOT A NEGOTIATION. YOU WILL DO IT FOR THE NUMBER I SAID. YOU WILL DO IT FOR THE NUMBER I SAID. YOU WILL.

We should have walked away then. Work began on the design of the café. We did – for the record – try to explain to him that “Bourgeois” had pejorative connotations. But he had decided and that was that. And besides, uniforms and caps were already being made with “Café Bourgeois” proudly emblazoned upon them. The fit-out had to be red, like the logo. Much of what little budget there was would be spent on the air handling and emergency systems as stipulated by the owners corporation act and the building code. The joinery was designed with the thinnest layer of a new beautiful plywood product we had found (see chapter on Super Table for more on this material). The

‘Batman’ logo over Gotham City. What he needed now was a designer to choose a font and someone to sketch up a fit-out to give to a sympathetic builder. There was little to recommend us to Mickey except that, as he knew through those who had introduced us to him, since the global financial dip on November 2008, commissions at MvS Architects were scarce.

We provided a fee proposal for full service which was rejected on the grounds that all he needed was a rough sketch and a builder would do the rest. The lease that Mickey was in the process of signing was for a shell in the new Myer building in Melbourne’s docklands. We explained that the building’s managers would need a full set of documents before approving the design for construction. Mickey said:

“Why are you not LISTENING to me? I only need a sketch, the builder will do the rest.”

We amended the fee for ‘sketch only’ services - a small sum, for a small part of the design of a small café. It came to a grand total of $12,000 + tax. Having received this, Mickey called and said:

Now, I’m going to say one number, and that’s the number you’re going to do it for. This is not a negotiation. This number is what you are going to do the job for. Do you understand?

Textbook Trump. I said I understood. The new number was $6,000+tax. Ouch. I swallowed. I begged to explain that we at least needed to cover wage costs and perhaps a little rent, and this would bring it to $9,000. We could do that.
lighting, for which there was no budget, was made from an extended length of hoola-hoop material which we sourced from a hoola-hoop company, through which a long LED strip of lights would be threaded, making a giant illuminated circle. This use of an everyday object to solve a lighting problem is different from the use of everyday objects to create a sense of curiosity in projects such as OverLogo and the The Little City that Could. In these, some semblance of recognition remains in the end result, even if the object is only vaguely familiar. The use of the hoola-hoop material did not look like a hoola-hoop so it did not carry any hint of resemblance, which would be necessary for the registration of familiarity. That said, the sheer size of the loop of light was imagined to have a curious quality of its own. This backfired, about which more later.

The shell in which we were working was large, with a high ceiling. The space, we felt, needed something that would transform it into something other than the empty box that it was. Motivated by the idea that architecture can be two dimensional, we settled on the idea of designing bespoke wallpaper for the space and the brand. This idea is prevalent within my community of practice. Carey Lyon\(^2\) writes in his master’s research project about how architecture is only 300mm deep on the surface of a building, and this is evident in many of the projects of Perrot Lyon Mathieson and Lyons. Also, as a student, I studied the SITE’s designs for the BEST product stores\(^3\) where architecture is successfully reduced to the thickness of the façade of the building. There is also the idea that an image-based approach to architecture is—to some extent—the result of learning about architecture from afar. Given the enormous geographical separation between Australia and the location of most of the buildings I examined during my undergraduate studies, learning about architecture was more frequently achieved though images than first-hand experience. From this grew a tendency to consider architecture as an image. An explicit exegesis on this is evident in Ashton Raggatt McDougall’s Howard/Kronborg Clinic, where an image of Venturi & Rauch’s Vanna Venturi house is placed on a photocopier, and the distortions from the photocopying process is then built into the façade of the building.\(^4,5,6\)

Between the graphic designers, a client obsessed with corporate branding and our ambition for two-dimensional spatial expression, we really struggled. Our employees were not happy working on this project—one resigned. A number of different options were explored—all red. Eventually we managed to put together a sketch that all parties were reasonably happy with. To say that there was a process for moving from one option through to its rejection to the next option would be to stretch the truth. We were just trying one thing after another in the hope that they would work. Feedback from the client was limited to the ability of the design to be a brand. I think it is safe to say that the design we eventually settled on was chosen via a musical-chairs type method. We simply settled on the

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design version that was on the drawing board when the time ran out. That said, the drawings and generated images looked really good. The swooping speed stripe running along the walls and up onto the ceiling appeared to give the space an impossible dynamism. The scheme jumped up from the page and grabbed anyone that looked at it. We had succeeded in making a most beautiful and magically appealing image. Perfect, as Mickey was quick to point out, for company branding. Café fit-out and new corporate logo, all for $6,000 - not bad really. Happy client.

Mickey took the sketch to his builder and negotiated a price—no doubt in his take-no-prisoners Trump style—and so ended our contribution to the project. Or so we thought. Mickey and the builder got into the detail of how to build and fit the café out while he finalised the lease and negotiated the landlord’s contribution to fit-out costs. The lease was signed within these contributions conditional on a fixed opening date and a contract signed with the builder locking in that same date. The sketch was then presented to the owners corporation managers for approval who deemed the document insufficient for them to sign off. They needed, they said, a full set of construction documents with building surveyor approval, OH&S in design certification, electrical and structural drawings that they could sign off on and use to ensure that the fit-out met their own management and insurance requirements. Mickey, not to be set back, demanded that the builder produce said drawings as part of his contract. The builder said: We’re builders, we don’t do design drawings, you need an architect.

As the opening dates had all been locked in—and the landlord contributions to fit-out contingent upon them—this represented a massive problem for our budding young entrepreneur. So, hat in hand, with a Café Bourgeois logo on it, Mickey came back to us and very, very nicely (nicest Mickey ever) and asked us if we could prepare a fee proposal to prepare the documents. This we did. Rather than sending him a letter—as this had not gone so well last time—I called him in to the office. I sat him down and said in my nicest voice: “Now, I’m going to say one number, and that’s the number we’re going to do it for. This is not a negotiation. This number is what we are going to do the job for. Do you understand?”

A fee was agreed, even if a little steeper than the client wanted. We completed the documents; the café was constructed and opened for business. As you can see from the photographs in this document, taken by Albert Comper, the drawings promised what was delivered. The wallpaper jumps from the wall and creates a remarkable dynamism. There was only one small problem - the sense that you are looking at a remarkable thing of wonder exists only when looking at the fit-out through a camera lens. To be in the café was to be overpowered by the size, colour and dynamism of the image rendered in the wallpaper. The giant loop of light dangling precipitously from the ceiling, instead of appearing an object of strange beauty, instead only served to make the space domineering. What the drawings promised - and what the images confirm - is not backed up by the experience of being in the space. There was another problem too - this one beyond our power to control. Mickey was in the café day and night telling all his customers about his Trump-dreams and taking no prisoners with his pricing strategy. To serve his customers more efficiently - and to prevent theft - he had installed a system where customers were given a docket from a person manning the till with their order on it. This docket could then be exchanged for your order from the person manning the coffee machine at the other end of the café. To ensure that his customers were ‘cared for’, he had coded the system to print
Christmas cracker style jokes at the bottom of each receipt. The business did not do well.

Six months after construction was completed, we entered Café Bourgeois into the Australian Interior Design Awards, hoping that the strength of the images would carry the project—and it was shortlisted. One afternoon, I received a call from the jury who were on their way to visit the café in person. My heart sank – they would meet Mickey and discover the lie of the photographs. But it was not to be so. As the jury’s chair explained to me, they were having trouble finding the café. They should perhaps be treated as visual guides—not as gospel. Indeed, how to get there, which corner it was on. But no, they could not find it. Being close to our office and keen for the opportunity to wave my arms around and distract the jury from Mickey and the fit-out, I agreed to meet them and help them on their quest. But I arrived to discover that I could not find it either—it had been demolished.

What can be learned about my design practice from this gloomy tale? Our design process relies heavily on tools of visual representation, and perhaps not quite so much trust should be placed in these. They should perhaps be treated as visual guides—not as gospel. Indeed, William J. Mitchell’s *The Reconfigured Eye* contains just such warnings. Such tools are reasonable at representing objects, but poor at representing space. This project also gives insight into the role that our clients play in the design process. While there is a certain amount that, necessarily, happens in-house, a feedback loop with a client is essential if our designs are to be relevant to them. In order for this reciprocity to take place, there needs to be a mutual understanding and respect of the ambitions of the other and the context in which they are based. We knew from our first meeting, that we did not like Mickey – we should not have taken him on as a client. It is interesting to examine the design process undertaken for Café Bourgeois, while also examining the design process undertaken for Wattle Avenue House. Many of the design tools used were similar—including the use of tools of visual representation and the use of colour and image to shape space. Also, the idea that the design would act as a ‘brand’ were present in both. What was missing, or failed, in Café Bourgeois, was the act of advocacy for the benefit of our particular design approach. We failed to convince the client that our approach would bring him value. In order to be paid a reasonable fee, we effectively blackmailed the Café Bourgeois client. It is also interesting to note that the Café Bourgeois client approached us cold, whereas we spent two years getting to know the Wattle Avenue House clients before they approached us. The role of advocacy for design generally, and advocacy for a design approach specific to a particular project in my design practices are evident in the chapters on the Lembaga Getah Malaysia master-plan, Wattle Avenue House and Scandinavian Freestyle. This is also covered broadly in the overarching essay.
Cafe Bourgeois dining area, floor strip and hula hoop light
Images by Albert Comper
On a working trip to Tokyo and Sendai in 2006, I was exposed to levels of urban density and building footprint sizes that I had not witnessed before. Although the previous projects that MvS Architects had been commissioned to do have included a high rise student housing complex, a central CBD apartment as a family home, an urban density and urban economics project called ‘Cloud Nets’¹ and ‘world’s best practice’ urban density projection project for the Department of Treasury and Finance, it would be inaccurate to say that either I or MvS Architects is predominantly concerned with issues of density. The time in Japan, if anything, had a far greater effect on me inasmuch as it exposed me to the eccentricities of Japanese culture, and gave me a sudden awareness of the similarities to Australia (in that they are both cultural islands). This trip also included a very revealing visit to Arakawa & Gins’ Site of Reversible Destiny (not density) in Gifu.²

Walking the streets of Melbourne, I found a site, and arising from its peculiar constraints, I conceived of a project for it. In the north-west corner of a laneway intersecting the western end of Bourke Street, Melbourne is a single level covered walkway whose sole purpose is to provide covered access to pedestrians walking to their cars parked in a large, multi-level car park buried deep within the block. The walkway, which is three metres wide, runs parallel to a blank wall five levels high. Together, the pair present a bleak aspect to the otherwise well groomed street; but they have been there so long, they fail to register in the awareness of most people, as I discovered when asking others to picture it in their minds eye.

The contrast between the walkway/wall and the rest of the wall appealed to me in a slightly romantic way, and this feeling was only encouraged further by others’ seeming ignorance of it.

Looking at it after my return from Japan, I realised that this site, at 3m wide and 20m long, was more than large enough to accommodate what would be considered a substantial building in Japan, and my affection for the bleakness of the wall was replaced with a sense that this could be the site for something new. The scheme that resulted from this realisation was never much more than a placeholder. This enabled it to function as description of possibility, rather than a resolved scheme. To be this, the drawings needed to present an unchallenging scheme. At one point, during the preparation of this placeholder scheme, my business partner quipped “When are we going to get to design this thing?”

A lot of the time and energy that I invest in MvS Architects has been, upon reflection, spent on promoting what MvS Architects is and does, inventing projects where before they did not exist, and bringing new clients to the business. It is interesting to note that all of the clients in the case of our smaller projects had not used architects before; that they now have, is a direct result of my advocacy for the value of architecture in general, and for the value of MvS Architects in particular. This entrepreneurial speculation is a highly creative act. It has a process to it, albeit a highly fluid one and involves leadership, advocacy and proposition. In my mind, then, we were designing the building even though the physical proposition represented in the drawings was tenuous at best. This is an interesting thing to have discovered in the work as it corrals advocacy, teaching, governance, entrepreneurship and networking under the umbrella of design.

With the 3m site, we imagined a row of 2m deep tenancies of some sort running along the side street. The walkway, pushed to the edge of the 3m strip of land would be sheltered from the weather by awnings to the tenancies—much like what happens in any other street. Theoretically, the site even allowed for a staircase within the 2m width, as long as their number was limited, lest their footprint take up the whole site. This site could easily take a 20m row of two level shops. They might, we speculated, house a bookshop, a café, a sunglasses shop and a newsagent. We approached the City of Melbourne to do a title search on the walkway, and we found out that they owned the land. Also, it appeared that an innocuous row of brass dots in the middle of the adjacent road represented the true extent of the boundary. The site was 6m wide, not three.

Knowing who owned the site, and that it could take a lot more than we imagined, we invited the City of Melbourne to engage us to do a scheme. They paired us with an assisted housing corporation called The Ladder Group, run by the Australian Football as part of its charitable works in the community. The Ladder Group and the City of Melbourne engaged MvS Architects, as well as a building surveyor and a quantity surveyor, to investigate the feasibility of offices and accommodation on the upper levels and retail on the ground floor. The resulting scheme included two levels of retail, three levels of residential studios, four levels of offices, a community room and a roof garden, all of which were accessible via a lift and were compliant with the fire and building and accessibility codes. To find potential for such a brief in the middle of the
which it had not been cut. In hindsight, there is a symbolic reading of this, given how the project came to be. When designing the project, there was not a conscious decision to make symbolic reference to this—it was simply a formal arrangement borrowed from an everyday object, and a scaled up key. This move is related to the scaling up of the tram ticket in OverLogo—even though the key is not recognisable without being told that it is there. The key in this façade is a clue to familiarity, but one that must be worked at—and I speculate in the overarching essay that a familiarity worked for, rather than dictated to, is one more likely to take hold.

The upper ‘key’ section of 59a Bourke Street is a dark brown, and the lower a light cream, which is another loose reference to something in the collective unconscious. In this case, however, it is not an everyday object, but an everyday design strategy—the use of the two-tone colour scheme. This type of colour scheme, while it can be seen in Victorian era interiors, is in this instance a reference to the two-tone shoe, or the two-tone car. Both of these types of colour schemes were most popular in 1920s and 1950s shoes, but the former are making a comeback in fashion.

On reflection, there are two elements of this design that are, as can also be central activities district of a city of 4 million people on a site that was not generally known to have even existed was quite a find. Observing this type of opportunistic design at play, I have reflected on what other evidence there is of this in my practice, and found there is plenty. In our scheme for Alice Smith School, a new canteen, requested by the school, ended up including a two-level 2400m² building with administration offices, a parents’ area and a cafeteria. For Wattle Avenue House, we turned the design brief on its head, creating a type of house not imagined by the client at all, and for The Keys to Mildura, we speculated on the viability of a series of sites across the town of Mildura that are not really considered sites at all. It is my observation that this is an important part of the design method of my practice.

Another way to look at this project is to look at the formal, spatial and compositional decisions that are represented in the drawings, despite their placeholder status. The McIlwraith Place elevation, in particular, shows the breakup of the building into retail and office spaces, accommodation and an office, but also shows how different architectural languages have been developed to express these. The façade of the first level shows two elements, each of a slightly different tone, which have misaligned ‘teeth’ whose gaps become windows. These were taken from a diagram of a key inserted into a lock for
seen in the Elizabeth Street GPT lobby re-design, a revival of Marcel Breuer’s Whitney Museum in New York, and also a hint of Bates Smart McCutcheon’s ICI House. The second, third and fourth level of 59a Bourke Street are small studio apartments. Each protrudes over the building boundary, as can be seen in the section. In order to meet the planning guidelines, under which dispensation can be granted to have exceeding its boundary, each studio was designed as a bay window, meaning this was the only part that protruded beyond the boundary. To achieve this, we invoked the ‘coffin’ window from the Whitney Museum in New York City. The original is stone clad, which seemed unachievable here given the cantilever, so instead we imagined these windows glazed, drawing on ICI House for a combination of glazing and spandrel panels, all strung together with some retro 1960s detailing. On the southern façade of the Whitney Museum is a thin blade wall which is only as thick as the material from which it is made. Reputedly, this was designed in anticipation of the development of the adjacent site into a large building—Marcel Breuer could see them coming up Madison Avenue towards the Museum site as he was designing. Recession intervened, the adjacent site was never developed, and the low-level buildings on it now have reasonably significant heritage value. This blade wall, the story behind its design, and the subsequent irony of its existence appeals to me, and we sought to revive it in the 59a Bourke Street project. Like Robert Venturi’s staircase that goes nowhere, the blade wall of 59a Bourke Street is a blade wall designed in fake anticipation of a future development.

This method of working is a development of the type of copying seen in Ashton Raggatt McDougall’s Kronberg Clinic. This practice based research has uncovered a development of this into a conscious compositional strategy. In the case of the Kronberg Clinic, the act of copying, and the associated distortion, was undertaken to make a specific point about the etymology of any architectural composition—especially given the history, in Australia, of adopting European and American ‘styles’, evident in Victorian era architecture in Australia and Peter McIntyre’s later work, for example at Dinner Plain. In the work of my practice, it is evident through observation that, Ashton Raggatt McDougall’s point having been well made, we are simply getting back to the business of composition, and all the mixing that goes with it, albeit in such a way that we are conscious of the etymology of every move, and comfortable about articulating them. This a-political borrowing of compositional techniques can be seen in very clearly defined ‘design domains’ in Paul Minifie’s Techne Trouve. In my work, the ‘design domains’ are far more loosely defined, having a greater eclectic base.

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Bruegelage

Project 10 — 59a Bourke St

59a Bourke Street before and after
Images by MvS Architects
Project 11 — Edithvale Seaford Wetlands
Discovery Centre
The Edithvale Seaford Wetlands Discovery Centre (ESWDC) is an interpretative centre, for Melbourne Water, the local water authority. The area in which the project is sited was, prior to the settlement of Australia by western nations, an extensive wetland extending along much of the eastern edge of what is now known as Port Philip Bay. During the 1950s, most of these wetlands were drained to make way for suburban housing subdivisions, and only a small portion remains. This remaining portion is now recognised as having global significance, and has attracted a heritage listing under the Ramsar Convention, an intergovernmental treaty that provides the framework for national action and international cooperation for the conservation and wise use of wetlands.

The project was instigated by a group of volunteers who care for the wetlands. They advocated that Melbourne Water, which manages all water based resources in Melbourne, should invest in a project that improved knowledge about, and awareness of, the wetlands and the flora and fauna within in it. In 2005, the project received funding, and tenders to provide design services for the project were called for.
In the context of this research, it is interesting to reflect on my various responsibilities and actions as project leader and director of the practice over the duration of the project.

As the project leader I was responsible for coordinating specialist advice from other consultants, communicating with the client and builder, and managing the MvS project team. As a director of MvS, I was responsible for account management of the project, and I also became a collaborator in the project for a duration overlapping the first part of this research.

Paul Minifie, the project’s design architect, took the lead on the design of the project. (As mentioned above, the schematic design phase was undertaken before the beginning of my tenure.) Subsequently, being the project’s primary communicator, I attempted to become literate in the design and the issues surrounding it by reviewing the incumbent documents, but found myself unable to develop an understanding of the project. As remaining uninformed was not tenable, given my role, I attempted a more engaged approach, and began taking part in the design process (at which point I became a design collaborator). This meant that I became directly involved in the negotiations about the ideology, composition, materiality, spatial arrangements and planning as they pertained to the project.

These negotiations took the form of combinations of conversations, hand drawings, developing virtual models, image editing and writing. These took place internally at MvS, but also externally in collaboration with the client, the engineers, the exhibition designers, and ultimately the builder. The conversation between me, Paul Minifie, Sam Rice and Jessica In (the main project team) about our approach to the project was minimal, and would have appeared absent altogether to an external observer. What I observed taking place was a design process whereby the discovery of a language to articulate our design approach could only occur after the act of design.

This required a good deal of telepathic-like communication between team members. This was only possible due to the team having been educated and having practiced within the same community of practice in Melbourne. Paul Minifie had been educated at RMIT University by many of the same people that I had been. While teaching at the same institution, he had taught me, and he and I had subsequently worked together at Ashton Raggatt McDougall for a number of years. Once Paul Minifie and Fiona Nixon formed Minifie Nixon, I shared an after-hours office with them, and also worked for them on their Marina Line Competition entry and the Centre for Ideas at the Victorian College of the Arts. This is discussed further in
a discomfort with the idealisation of nature. The universe, outside of the existence of humans (if such a distinction can even be made) is indeed a thing of great wonder and beauty. But is it not also a place of carnivorous and parasitic creatures? It is not also a place of deathly freezing ice winds, exploding forests fires and violent tornadoes?

There is very good reason for all buildings, new and old, to be designed, or retrofitted, with energy saving and carbon neutral design features. But there is no reason whatsoever that sustainable architecture need look like sustainable architecture, just as there is no reason that waterproofed architecture need look like waterproofed architecture; and just as appearing to keep the rain out does not actually help keep the rain out, merely appearing like an energy efficient building has little relation to it actually being energy efficient.

Sustainable design, an important technical issue though it is, does not make an architectural language, just as waterproofing, though it is an important technical issue, does not make an architectural language.

Within the language I was developing, there was a high degree of invention and post-rationalisation taking place. What was of particular interest was how this language that I was inventing was affecting my own intuitive actions when working amongst the design team.

The rhetoric that began to develop was based on the idea that, being sited in a wetlands, being about a wetlands, and having a long list of sustainable design features, one might be forgiven for thinking that an obvious aesthetic for the building would be one bearing a resemblance to the natural environment surrounding it. This might take the form of timber details and ‘natural’ materials with tones of native flora. Colloquially, this is referred to as “The Nuts & Berries” school of architecture, and is an approach to the development of architectural language that I had become very suspicious of. The roots of the suspicion are in the ‘Community of Practice’ section of this document.

However, in spite of this telepathic method of group design, in which communication by shrug or grimace is more common than spoken word, we need to develop an explicit rhetoric in order to communicate with the client, local planning authority, and members of the public—and also for the practice research seminars that form part of this reflective practice research. Being the nominated communicator for the project, this task fell to me, and I developed it not in careful consultation with other team members, but rather on the fly. As this was taking place, I observed an interesting phenomenon: internally, the project team was developing the design based on an intuitive approach (which is to say they were developing the design based on what felt right to them, without any obligation to articulate these feelings), while externally, I was developing a written and spoken language specific to the project.

Testing and developing panel and facade patterns

Images by MvS Architects
Based on this hunch, the language that I began to develop to articulate the project was one which expressed the more complex relationship between humans and the environment we inhabit; one that understands that the two (if they can be separated at all) are part of the same system; one that recognises that while we are in danger of destroying it, it is at the same time in danger of destroying us. The built environment, architecture, is a key frontier in protecting human beings from the elements, and there is no reason not to celebrate it for doing so. As it happens, this is an ideal rhetoric for an architectural language meant for a sustainable building site in a wetlands surrounded by suburban subdivisions. The very purpose of the building is to encourage the two to happily co-exist.

This in turn began to affect how the design of the building evolved, and a series of puns on the concept of nature began to develop, as well as a distinctly suburban roof-line. To the west, the building’s concrete panels make up a façade in which the line of the hip-roof is expressed. The under-croft of the centre is clad in the bright orange of the Flame Robin, which is a bird not found in these wetlands. The panels are designed to appear as an elephant skin, such that the birds might feel at home resting upon it, as on their African savannah. This is a deliberate nonsense in that, firstly, what bird could be fooled by an artfully designed façade into thinking that a building was in fact an elephant, and secondly, no birds from Africa migrate to these wetlands (they come here mostly from Russia).

The south-east window of the building...
is a bird’s-mouth window which at the scale of the building appears to be like some giant industrial bird-monster. The glazing above the cantilevered sliver of floor slab to the east is lined with a film of Escher birds, in which the birds so perfectly flock that the negative space between them creates the figure of a bird flying in the opposite direction.

During the schematic phase of the project, the building’s façade had been represented only in the form of a place-holder stating their material.

In the construction tender documents these panels were described as having a three-dimensional pattern which was described in principle, but not in detail. Thus, the detailed design of these panels remained unresolved for the larger part of the project. Towards the end of the project, and at the latter part of this reflective practice research, these panels were designed in the office and allowed for reflection on what takes place during my design practice when a stated outcome, here developed through the fake-it ‘til you make-it technique outlined in the overarching essay, marks the starting point of a design process.

We knew that we wanted a series of panels that expressed the complex relationship between humans and the environment they inhabit. This meant that we wanted the façade to be a surface that was three-dimensionally complex, yet ordered at the same time. We wanted the panels to be repeating panels (which also afforded us the opportunity for some cost saving), but also to repeat in such a way that belied their repetition. We wanted a façade that looked organic, yet bore the marks of industrial
manufacturing techniques. To achieve this, Paul and I briefed Jessica In—in part through shrug and grimace and in part through explicit well-articulated instruction—to write an automated script, mimicking a technique found in nature called cellular automata, which Paul had previously used on the Australian Wildlife Health Centre. In this instance, we also stipulated that the technique, which had previously been only two dimensional, be allowed to operate in the third dimension as well, to give the panels texture and depth. Armed with this explicit set of goals, we found that the number of variations that this produced were seemingly limitless. The computer code was a time-based one, where agents in a system were given rules about how to behave towards each other, and this behaviour was then left to compute—the ultimate relationship of this series of objects then being formed by the system we had set up. But exactly what this ultimate relationship was, where the parts stop moving and a fixed surface made from these parts became formed, was highly dependent on when we, the authors, decided to stop the process running.

In order to decide when to stop it, it became clear that we had to know what we were looking for. The purpose of engaging such a technique, rather than simply composing something, is the promised opportunity of uncovering something that you didn’t already know you could compose—the opportunity to surprise oneself. In order to decide if the parameters, stated above, were met or not, a subtle aesthetic judgement needed to be made. To do this we set out to look for something that made us uncomfortable—which is to say, something that we did not yet understand as beautiful, something that we could see, but could not yet comprehend.

Through this process, we found something that made us suitably uncomfortable, but which was still a little too familiar—as though we had become so accustomed to feeling uncomfortable that we had become comfortable with it. Ultimately, the computer code proved only partially successful—and we had exhausted it, so we resorted back to a compositional approach using a technique borrowed from William J. Mitchell’s *Reconfigured Eye*, which was also borrowed by Howard Raggatt in his House for a Superman project. This is discussed in the overarching essay in the section on designing through deliberate discomfort, but what became evident through reflecting on the design of the Edithvale Seaford Wetlands Discovery Centre is that repeatedly switching between a carefully articulated approach and an un-articulated intuitive one is an important part of my practice.

—Paul Minifie


The Edithvale Seaford Wetlands Discovery Centre, looking south over the wetlands
Image by Peter Bennetts

The Edithvale Seaford Wetlands Discovery Centre, looking through the ‘Escher’ window and looking down at the wetlands
Image by Peter Bennetts

The Edithvale Seaford Wetlands Discovery Centre, the ‘green’ space of the amenities corridor
Image by Peter Bennetts

The Edithvale Seaford Wetlands Discovery Centre, looking towards the vertigo window
Image by Peter Bennetts

The Edithvale Seaford Wetlands Discovery Centre, looking south over the wetlands
Image by Peter Bennetts
The Edithvale Seaford Wetlands Discovery Centre, the 'vertigo' window on the south west corner

Image by Peter Bennetts
The Edithvale Seaford Wetlands Discovery Centre, the ‘bird’s mouth’ window on the south east corner

Image by Peter Bennetts
I have characterised this research contribution as being a result of the interpolation of a number of different layers of research. Together, these layers constitute a proposed research value that stems from the series of explorations that I have presented in the Projects chapter. The fundamental and radical proposition of design practice research is that, if a design practice shows value in research terms, this value is embedded in the design and in the work itself. The research must be uncovered in the body of work itself, as it lies dormant in it. Design work in the practice, conceived of as a research laboratory over the duration of the investigation, may help to capture the dormant contribution, while potentially adding new research material. The practitioner senses that his work has some experimental value; that he might be on to something that deserves more careful observation and subsequent interrogation. The Projects chapter presents eleven selected experimental scenarios. In these experiments, I sensed an implicit research value worthy of further reflection and scrutiny in search of potential research significance. This reflection constitutes a fundamental first layer of research. As a select body of work, it sets itself apart from the rest of my own work (as well as the work of other practitioners) in that it potentially contains research value, however implicit, at the start. To attribute research value to one’s body of work requires, as I see it, ongoing interaction with what is called one’s ‘community of practice’. This evaluation process, at that first level just described, is itself an extraordinarily complex process. The complexity can be seen in my efforts to unpack my community of practice which led me to reflect upon it through nine different lenses.

When I start to ask what sets my practice apart from others’ contribution to the field, I look to my first research layer where a complex decision making process about what work to include and exclude unfolds and leads to hunches about to which experiments in the research laboratory of my practice might be used to show something specific. Yet at this level, the actual research contribution must still be seen as implicit and it would be a mistake to claim that the research has somehow already been done. While the body of work may stem from a venturous, innovative practice operating at the edges of a field, that venturous practice has not reached the capacity to reveal its insights. It may well be driven by urges and fascinations, but the discoveries are dormant in the same way that the urges and fascinations are not yet understood.
To elevate the practice from that level of unawareness requires that the discoveries that arise from the experimental scenarios are made explicit. Through this second level, where the tacit discoveries are articulated, a practice that engages in practice-based research can distinguish itself from a merely innovative and venturous practice. This second research layer, the making explicit of one’s discoveries and insights, owes much to an equally complex further wave of interactions with one’s community of practice. Where others may be or have been successful in showing their way of doing things, how could this specific work of mine foreground my way of doing things as something specific and worth sharing in terms of research?

While the elevation from commercial practice to venturous practice indicates that there might be something worthy of interrogation and exploration, it is the second research layer, facilitated by a process of fine-grained interaction with one’s community of practice, which raises a venturous practice to the point of research.

At the very first practice research symposium, I presented the bulk of the content which was to form the subject of the reflection. This bulk represented the raw material of a practice in which the complex and inter-related nature of how I decided to undertake each project, the nature of the projects, and my role in them, the intellectual context in which the projects were conducted, the list of peers that I associated myself with, the experiments being conducted, and how these were all articulated, was a tangled mess. The projects themselves were eclectic in type, as were the clients they were being conducted for, and the collaborators they were being generated with.

As I began to un-tangle the mess and develop an awareness of each of the many elements within it and their relationships to each other, it began to emerge that, while there was great benefit arising from this burgeoning awareness, the tangled nature of these projects was in fact the key driver of the creative engine of my practice.

This tangle can be seen in the research diagram at the front of this document, which dates back to the first practice research symposium, and it was visible again in the exhibition that was present in June 2015 at the RMIT Design Hub. Necessarily, the document that describes this research cannot be a similarly tangled one. The exhibition was the moment at which the tangled nature of the practice, and the ordered nature of the document and the research it made explicit, were linked. Through the awareness that I have gained from this research in its second layer, my practice is no longer a victim of its tendency towards entanglement. I now have control of this tangle, and am aware of the position of my practice within it at any given moment. There is significant personal learning within this, which has made this reflective practice process extremely valuable.

Beyond this personal learning are the findings of the research, within which contributions to knowledge can be found. These contributions take the form of: an understanding of the contribution of entanglement — wildcards, and eclectic relationships between things — to the theory of creative practice; development in the use of referencing in architectural language through the inclusion of implicit and strangely familiar references as a method of generating a sense of belonging in designed environments; an understanding of the role that a wireless community of peers plays in creating a platform from which experiments can be conducted; the effect on design outcomes that arises from considering design as a form of advocacy; the impact on design that arises from the application of vocabularies that are invented when finding ways to communicate with multiple actors with competing interests; and through a careful observation of the etymology of ideas, how they are developed, the generative value of contesting them, and the collaboration that architectural design processes requires, comes a questioning of the idea that the authorship of a project can be traced back to any single individual.

Richard Blythe invites practitioner-researchers to start to reflect on their stock of fascinations that lead to urges to act, whether implicit or explicit. One may also start to reflect upon urges that
lead to fascinations in things. Either way, such a stock evolves over time, in a mostly linear trajectory, as practices develop. There is commercial pressure to produce work in a consistent and predictable manner—to continue drawing from the same fascinations and follow the same urges—so as to be able to market services in a coherent and pithy way. By understanding the role that wildcards play in my practice—and by making explicit that I use them and how I use them—I have created a situation, through this research, wherein my practice is not branded by its stated interests and actions. This enables me to experiment while working within the constraints of commercial realities.

The earliest project reflected upon in this research, Overlogo, is one that makes use of an explicit reference of a known object—a tram ticket. As my practice developed, the referencing in my projects becomes less explicit, yet referencing still took place. An explicit reference generates an ‘aha’ moment, like a punch-line in a joke. Jokes are famous for being conversation killers, and naturally entertaining people tend not to tell them. The implicit reference, as observed in my practice, is designed to hint at a punch-line, but without setting up a joke, leaving the audience with the sense of knowing, but not knowing, what it is that they know. This allows them simultaneously to generate their own new knowledge of a thing, and at the same time, feel that they are already part of a shared knowledge. This is a combination of a sense of having agency in something because you created it, and a sense of having agency in something because it created you. The term I have coined for this is ‘Deja Voodoo’.

The wireless community of practice is an important discovery, as it points to design as a social act, rather than an act of individuals. I have titled the section on my community of practice ‘an orchestrated community of practice’ to indicate that this community of practice, and the wireless one within it, is one that I have chosen to be part of—one of whose constantly shifting boundaries I define. This wireless community is one that I feel proud to be part of, and I feel a sense of learning and achievement and success through my association with it. That this community is there provides a platform from which I can conduct experiments, making what is radical feel as if it were an expected norm. This makes experimentation more likely to occur, and less risky when it does. When experiments lead to failure and loss, as they sometimes do, the weight of these failures is shouldered by the omnipresent sense of this wireless community of practice. Thinking of this wireless community as a form of zeitgeist—the spirit of an age or a time—is a useful way to think about this, but the term collects from too broad a community to be helpful when describing a community of practice as being orchestrated. Instead, I prefer to qualify it as a localised zeitgeist. By knowing this orchestrated community well, what they are experimenting with, and how the present research is innovative within the field of this community generally, I know, am doing something at the boundaries of the field to which I seek to contribute.

Reflecting on the speculative nature of some of the projects of my practice, such as 596 Bourke Street and The Keys to Mildura, I have come to understand that design can be considered a form of advocacy. To design something is to suggest that it come into existence. In the two projects mentioned, designs were generated for them before the client was approached, and the designs themselves were used to advocate for the projects to come into existence. In the case of The Keys to Mildura, proposing these designs to potential clients led ultimately to MvS Architects being awarded the commission for Wattle Avenue House. This is a reasonably common sequence of events in general architectural practice. The contribution to knowledge that arises from considering design as a form of advocacy comes not from this process of generating commissions, but from observing that ‘design as advocacy’ takes place more generally in the design processes, regardless of whether they are speculative or not. Imagine for a moment that a drawing is a thing that can ‘advocate’. When designing within a team, a drawing of how the geometry of a portion of a building should be configured becomes the thing that advocates to all the members of the team for a particular outcome. Another example of this is the inclusion of high quality visualisations up front in tender and construction documents. While builders do not peg out buildings or measure quantities of materials from

images, the visualisations help us, the architects, to advocate for our preferred design intent when builders propose changes and make substitutions to the contract documents. Every time a design mark is made, in any medium, and then shared with other people who are engaged in the design process, advocacy through design is taking place. Reflecting on and recording instances of this taking place in my practice is one of the findings that this research thesis can contribute to the knowledge of how design is practiced.

Reflecting on my practice, I have observed impacts on my designs that have arisen from the application of semiotic and geometric vocabularies that have been invented in order to find ways to communicate with multiple actors, often with competing interests. See for example the project section Practicing in Kuala Lumpur and Qinhuangdao. This method of design, which overlaps with my research on wildcards, I consider an important contribution to the understanding of the inner workings of design processes. The written or spoken word can be molded to communicate one thing in two different ways, as politicians will do when selling their policies to disparate constituents. Built form is less malleable, and only one version of events can be spelled out in architectural ‘grammar’. My observation that I insert multiple references, lineages, and meanings into my projects, but express them in an implicit way in order to encourage multiple readings of any one design, is an important part of how I practice, and by making them explicit through this research, I seek to contribute my reflections on this method to our understanding of architectural and design practice.

As a result of this research, I have observed that I share the authorship of my projects with my collaborators, my employees, my clients, my mentors, my heroes and my peers. To be able to articulate this accurately, as the balance of authorship differs from project to project, I have conceived of a multi-dimensional field in which the proximity and gravitational pull of any of the points are constantly being adjusted. When a client makes a direct suggestion about a design, this client has a high degree of proximity; but being one in number, the client has only a limited gravitational pull. My extended peer group, or wireless community of practice, has a low degree of proximity; yet its members are great in number, and they therefore have a greater gravitational pull. In this diagram are also wildcards, heroes, favourite buildings and the wisdom of mentors. By understanding the complex blends that exist between all these things, a map of authorship begins to appear for each project. As a result of this research, I now understand that authorial attribution is an atmosphere, not an anchor.

To conduct design practice research largely means to construct a scaffold around one’s practice. The scaffold facilitates access to those experiments in my body of work that I have deemed significant in terms of a research contribution to the field. As such, the scaffold, or typology I have developed to analyse my community of practice has an instrumental value. It allows me to discern discrete elements that play a role in what might otherwise only appear as a rich and eclectic entangled organic whole. Such analytic tools, however, are not mere instruments to be discarded after the task, as if the scaffold had to be removed in order to let the work continue. In fact, I now understand the research scaffold developed over the course of this investigation as integral to my practice, in the same way that my practice is integral to this research. I would argue that this implies a healthy degree of de-mystification of my practice, as essential parts of the otherwise unexamined whole have been investigated. At the closure of this research, I have re-instated what has been extracted, however, without the need to remove the research scaffold that has emerged over time. While in the future I will engage in some specific tasks of capture and documentation in a less acute manner, the research methods of reflection, articulation and awareness will continue as an integral part of my work and practice.

Birds and micro-light aircraft flocking as one
An Exhibition of Curiosities

In June 2015, I will prepare and present an exhibition in the Design Hub in the RMIT University City Campus—a standard part of the process of this type of PhD. At this point, the examiners will have read and become familiar with this document and its contents. This document, as outlined in the introduction, seeks to make plain and ordered my reflections on what is a complex and tangled practice. There is a risk that, in the ordered-structuring of this research, the importance of the complex tangle may be seen to have been de-emphasised, when in fact this complexity and this entanglement is central to my practice, and central to the findings relating to theories of creativity arising from this research.

To address this, the exhibition will seek to present the work, as well as my reflections on my design processes, in their natural, tangled state. To achieve this, the exhibition will take the form of a cabinet of curiosities, where objects are placed on display in a manner which resists categorisation, and tie it to the ordered state of the findings, and contributions to knowledge, that this research makes.

The presentation that I will make to the examiners and audience will tie together the ordered content of the document and the ordered process of reflection that has been undertaken, the complex, tangled nature of my practice, and the findings arising from this research.

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Project List

2015
Wildlife Art Museum of Australia

2014
Access Upgrades, Deakin University, Melbourne (MvS Architects).

New Academic Street, RMIT University, Melbourne (MvS Architects + Lyons + HAW + NMBW + Peter Maddison).

Morpung Avenue House, Ross Lake & Helen Vivian, Mildura (MvS Architects).

Hevea Tower, Lembaga Getah Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur (MvS Architects + iPartnership).

Alice Smith School JB Campus, KL (MvS Architects in association with iPartnership)

Alice Smith School EP Campus, KL (MvS Architects in association with iPartnership)

Super Table, Leon van Schaik, Melbourne (MvS Architects)

2013
LGIM Headquarters Master-plan, Lembaga Getah Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur (MvS Architects + iPartnership)

Hero Apartments Lobby, Melbourne (MvS Architects + Fiona Abicare)

We used to talk about love, exhibition design at AGNSW, Sydney (MvS Architects)

2012
Parallel Collisions, exhibition design for the Adelaide Biennial at AGSA, Adelaide (MvS Architects)

Datam Regalia Towers, Perbadanan Kemajuan Negeri Selangor, Shah Alam (MvS + iPartnership)

Star Voyager exhibition design at ACMI, Melbourne (MvS Architects)

Qinhuangdao Super-Yacht City Master-plan, Qinhuangdao (MvS Architects + Terrior)

2011
Sugar Station Confectionary Stores, Seven locations in Melbourne (MvS Architects)

10,000 Room Eco Hotel, Dehan Group, Ji County (MvS Architects)

2010
Edithvale Seaford Wetlands Discover Centre, Melbourne (MvS Architects)

Wattle Avenue House, Stefano de Pieri & Donata Carrazza, Mildura (MvS Architects)
Dying in Spite of the Miraculous, Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces & Melbourne Festival, Melbourne (MvS Architects)

Geelong Botanic Gardens Visitor Precinct, The City of Greater Geelong, Geelong (MvS Architects + Rush Wright Associates)

The Keys to Mildura, Tasco Inland Australia, The Mildura Brewery, Mildura (MvS Architects)

2009 Carvon Street Housing, City of Melbourne, North Melbourne (MvS Architects)

Café Bourgeois, Café Bourgeois Pty. Ltd., Melbourne (MvS Architects)

2009 Righetti Residence, Andrew Righetti and Natasha Suran (MvS Architects)

2007 Carlton Brewery Redevelopment Competition & Schematic Design, Grocon Pty. Ltd., Melbourne (MvS Architects)

59a Bourke Street, City of Melbourne & The Ladder Project, Melbourne (MvS Architects)

Palm Deira Corniche, Nakheel, Dubai (MvS Architects + Rush Wright Associates)

Saadiyat Island Master-plan, Abu Dhabi (for NHArchitecture)

Burwood Square Master-Plan, Readings Entertainment, Melbourne (for NHArchitecture)

2006 Over & Over, Becton Esplanade Public Artwork (for Julia Gorman)

Melbourne Recital Centre and MTC Theatre Project, Melbourne (for ARM Architects)

Brisbane Central, QIC Development Corporation, Brisbane (for ARM Architects)

2005 Docklands Masterplan, Vic Urban, Melbourne (for ARM Architects)

2004 OverLogo, City of Melbourne, Melbourne (Jan van Schaik + Lou Weis)

Melbourne Central Redevelopment General Property Trust & Lend Lease, Melbourne (for ARM Architects)

2002 Yantai Coal Economic College, Yantai (for Minifie Nixon Architects)

2001 Centre for Ideas, Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne (for Minifie Nixon Architects)

Schoen’s Unnamed 12, Orleans (for Minifie Nixon Architects)

2009 Table Ray, Bob Weis, Melbourne (Jan van Schaik)

2006 A-Table, Melbourne (Jan van Schaik + Fiona Abicare)
List of References


Venturi, Robert, Denise Scott Brown and


**Artworks and exhibitions**


**Buildings**


