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Inhabitable Fictions

1 Introduction

This text explores the notion of space development through a hybrid method of “thinking and not thinking” (Creed, 2011): “thinking” acts as a metaphor for a systematic and analytical approach that follows more practical and functional rules and is opposed to “not thinking,” which explores the intuitive mode of sensing and imagining ways of creating spaces that follow more hidden prescribed conditions of the existing.

The aim is to give an insight into this specific practice of designing spaces by highlighting a methodology of craftsmanship and by going through examples of spatial works developed by different practitioners.



Figure 1+2: Stockerweg 11, transformation of a listed farmhouse from 1750, Munich. (Peter Haimerl Architekten; image courtesy of Edward Beierle).

2 Defining the Essential

Crafting Ideas

The first contact with a project will be mostly the client's brief – a summary of the targets formulated by the client or the client's representative. It will contain actual parameters such as given space, budget, programme, etc. But it doesn't tell you much about the atmospheric ambition of a project. Understanding the overall vision is crucial, and therefore it is paramount to analyse and question the client's brief. As it is written from the client's point of view, reading in between the lines will help to discuss and develop possibilities for the design that the client might not have thought of and can benefit from.

Apart from the importance of intensively examining the client's views and interpretations, it is equally important to experience the site and its location. Existing conditions, such as dimensions, colours, textures, light, wind directions, smell, etc., are parameters that define the appearance of any space. As with the examination of the client's brief, the interpretation of those parameters is equally fundamental for the design process. Having carefully distilled the client's brief and considered the inherent nature of the existing environment, the ideas for the design will surface through a mix of interpretations and impressions: through "thinking and not thinking" (Creed, 2011). All ideas are valid, even if they are not ultimately applicable; however, they will help to progress towards something which is essential for the project.

In similar ways, the Pritzker Prize-winning practice RCR Arquitectes (n.d.) summarise their ethos on their webpage, saying "the strength of RCR's architecture lies in its ability to transcend its roots with a universal language resulting from a profound search for the essential." For its founders, this essence emerges from the search for emptiness, from a dialogue between place and architecture. Still, at the same time, it is born of creative dialogue in the style of jazz, in which "Me" is changed into "We."

As a result, these ideas create spaces that go beyond fulfilling functional needs but invite the user or visitor into an imaginative world where spaces tell a story in which they can take part; it is a space that feels right and also triggers a thinking and exploration process.

“Through the looking glass,” as described by Alexandra Stara (2015, p. 1), can be seen as an allegory for creating an architectural idea. It is an ongoing attempt to translate the notion of Alice submerging into an imaginary world in its purest sense – a world that is defined by atmospheres. Peter Zumthor (2006, p. 13) states in his lecture about atmospheres: “We perceive atmosphere through our emotional sensibility – a form of perception that works incredibly quickly, and which we humans evidently need to help us survive [...] Something inside us tells an enormous amount straight away. We are capable of immediate appreciation, of a spontaneous emotional response, of rejecting things in a flash.”

For those emotional responses, the architectural idea needs to surface in a spatial experience – a space which is thoroughly considered and designed.



Figure 3: Gallery, atelier, and house, interior view, Bordeaux. (RCR Architectes; image courtesy of PCR Architectes).

Crafting Spaces

The inherent character of a space acts as a fundamental basis of any design process. This is why it is of vital importance to experience a site thoroughly when starting the design process. The first site visit reveals its character on many levels, and often even unconscious impressions will surface later in the process when developing the idea.

The overarching question is: What does a space want to be when it is not how we currently see it? Seeing space in an abstract way and not with its meaning helps to start a new design process. This is when the act of “defining the essential” takes place. What are the outstanding elements that are defining its identity and how can this transform into something that fulfils the needs but at the same time tells a story? These could be specific elements, materials, colours, or just the light that travels into the space in an unusual way and, by doing so, reveals the character of a space that isn’t really visible but inherently exists. Once this character is identified, there can also be a conscious decision to omit it by means of overwriting.

As spaces are fluid and contingent, a contained space also defines its surrounding space; boundaries are joining elements where transitions exist. Using the right materials, which emphasise these boundaries and transitions, already can act as the main driver for a successful project.

Zumthor (2006, p. 41) talks in his lecture about composure and seduction. “It has to do with the way architecture involves movement. Architecture is a spatial art, as people always say. But architecture is also a temporal art. My experience of it is not limited to a single second. Wolfgang Riehm and I are in full agreement about this: architecture, like music, is a temporal art. That means thinking about the way people move in a building.” The frameworks for these spatial experiences are structures, and therefore the important question is: How do we craft structures?

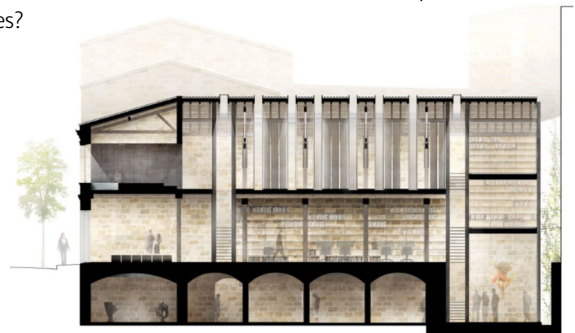


Figure 4+5: Gallery, atelier and house, abstract drawing (left) and section (right) depicting “Defining the Essential,” Bordeaux. (RCR Architectes; image courtesy of PCR Architectes).

Crafting Structures

In order for architectural ideas to materialise in space, questions about form, proportion, and materiality need to be raised. The look and feel of a space will give a sense of this architectural idea.

The decision-making process can be extensive, and it requires a high level of research and testing. Temporary structures, spaces, and performances play an important part, as they allow one to experiment and take risks. This experimentation entails the opportunity to create spatial prototypes, which in turn also influence permanent structures and spaces. Regulations can be deliberately tested or even discarded in order to explore uncommon spatial solutions. Equally, taking a material out of context and using it differently takes this understanding to a different level, in order to be able to work with it, alter it, join it ... and (ideally) make it more powerful. It can be a catalyst for an imaginary journey for the visitor.

Experimentation with materials and spaces also instigates playfulness, a form of enjoyment where the users of the space are animated to explore and interact with the space itself as well as with each other. It therefore also acts as a social connector via physical and emotional exploration.

A perceived space will need to have structures where light and air are framed and caught; colour and materiality give those structures a distinct character and the surrounded spaces a unique quality. The haptic quality of elements is equal in importance to the reflection of sound, which is dependent on the adjacent surfaces. Dense or porous material defines spaces that are hard or soft, cold or warm.

As a consequence, even structural details make the idea visible and, most importantly, perceivable. This approach to building/constructing atmospheres is very visible in the examples shown above. Both Peter Haimel and RCR instantaneously reject a fundamental alteration of the existing in its context; in fact, they fully preserve the appearance in its surrounding.

The specific new identity is created by discovery and by seeing the apparent structure not in the context of its meaning, but purely in the context of its appearance. By means of unpacking the power of a specific geometrical element – the strong pitched roof (Haimel), penetration of light through roof structure (RCR) – and in conjunction with layering, a specific content or historical narrative brings a building to a new life.

This understanding of the potentials of a place can be seen as intuitive, and in that sense it symbolises the “not thinking” (Creed, 2011) method, as opposed to the constructed, analytical layering of historical facts, technical conditions, and programmes, which represents the “thinking” method. This design process can be analysed further through the comparison of KHBT’s projects “No 1 Balfour Place” and “Un-veiled.”

3 How can needs be viewed from a methodological point of view?

Both projects had to overcome spatial parameters that have been identified as obstacles. However, the final design response has taken a different direction through the acknowledgment of the intuitive, the “not thinking.” In the case of “No 1 Balfour Place”, the obstacle has been represented by a hidden, awkward and run-down stair that bridged the former two flats across a communal circulation area. The instant response was to highlight and exaggerate this element, in fact to elevate it to the overarching, identity-defining element, as it was the extraordinary building part that gave the apartment character.

By doing so, new potentials were suddenly discovered, such as the intrusion of natural light into the otherwise dark corridor, as well as a more efficient reorganisation of space. However, these design operations were carefully thought through and hence fall into the category of “thinking.”

“Un-veiled,” on the other hand, took the approach of negating or neutralising the given existing space. Intuitively, the first response was to alter the vast and uninspiring glass atriums as much as possible, i.e., to eradicate the existing spatial attributes by means of filling the atriums up with material. The immersive character of the final design has been developed through the means of “thinking.” The choice of material and colour both represent the very nature of the RIBA, i.e., accompanying architects through the building process. The red mesh used to cover the scaffoldings of a building site symbolises this process from start to finish (from covering to unveiling). It interpreted the aims and purpose of the new northern national architecture centre by carving out scaled-down negatives of iconic buildings of UK’s North. By doing so, it highlighted its very own identity.

Visitors could walk through this newly created space while being fully immersed; they could find themselves on a journey in a new imaginative world and experience the essential.

Having described the design approach to “defining the essential” from the creator’s position, one shouldn’t forget the receiver’s point of view. As Peter Zumthor remarks with regard to perceiving atmospheres, it is crucial for all design processes to verify the design from the receiver’s experience.

3 Experiencing the Essential

“Defining the Essential” applies to any given brief, no matter who the client is or what programme has to be developed. However, there is a difference between experiencing the essential in private spaces and experiencing the essential in public spaces. In private spaces, the receiver of the spatial narrative might only be one person (the client) or a specific group of people; in public spaces, anybody could be the receiver. Due to the individuality of people, it is important to distinguish between somebody and anybody on the receiving end.

When looking into the design of private spaces, it is fundamental to understand the needs and programmatic brief. However, it is equally important to explore the (hidden) wishes of the person(s) that will inhabit the future space. At the same time, the space itself reveals an inherent potential that should be picked up, and this acts as a starting point to develop a narrative that guides the author through all design phases.

As described above, the project “No 1 Balfour Place” demonstrates this notion by evolving the core idea around the most prominent and problematic existing element. By elevating the stair that runs as a ribbon through every single space, it transforms this stair into the all-defining element of the space and reveals a bold and beautiful new identity.



Figure 6: No 1 Balfour Place, conversion of two flats, existing hidden stair, London. (KHBT Architects; image courtesy of KHBT Architects).

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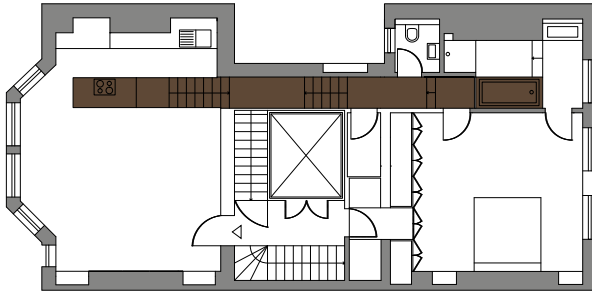


Figure 7: No 1 Balfour Place, plan drawing of the stair transforming into the defining “essential” element, London. (KHBT Architects; drawing/image courtesy of KHBT Architects).



Figure 8: No 1 Balfour Place, meandering stair linking all rooms in the flat, London. (KHBT Architects; image courtesy of Johannes Marburg).



Figure 9: Croft Lodge, conversion of a protected rural house, existing condition, Leominster UK. (Kate Darby and David Connor; image courtesy of David Connor).



Figure 10: Croft Lodge, exterior of completed project, Leominster UK. (Kate Darby and David Connor; image courtesy of James Morris).

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The design for Croft Lodge follows a similar approach, despite the makeover of a whole building that becomes part of an interior space after the transformation. The listed 18th-century cottage designed by Kate Darby and David Connor incorporates a new house and studio. The project constitutes the ultimate form of conservation by leaving every single element in its found, existing condition. A new skin of corrugated metal sheets protects the existing farmhouse, which includes elements such as peeling pieces of render, dilapidated windows, and broken and rotten timber, as well as dead ivy and old birds' nests. By creating the contrast between new and old, all these elements, as well as the spaces in between, transform into a unique place of astounding beauty and character.



Figure 11: Croft Lodge, interior view, keeping every detail of the existing, Leominster UK. (Kate Darby and David Connor; image courtesy of James Morris).

In the case of public spaces, which have become an increasingly fundamental part of our built environment, it is important to create places that reveal not only their own site-specific identity, but also the possibility for people to immerse themselves and to spend an indefinite time in order to meet other people, to simply rest, or even to work. Public spaces also can be overwhelming in their overly prescribed and commercialised character. Here a very effective method can be to neutralise the space by omitting this character through the means of overwriting, as is done in the abovementioned project “Un-veiled.” Movable materials, such as textiles or curtains, are successful devices: Veiling and unveiling relates not only to the physical space, but also to the perceived space. It can trigger imagination and should ideally lead to a process of exploration – an active state of the visitor. As these imagined spaces are generated in one’s mind, the visitor should feel the urge to interact with it and be intrigued to explore more. Light, air, colour, and sound are generators for such a discovery and can be controlled through (new) openings, enclosures, heights, depths – views which are implemented.

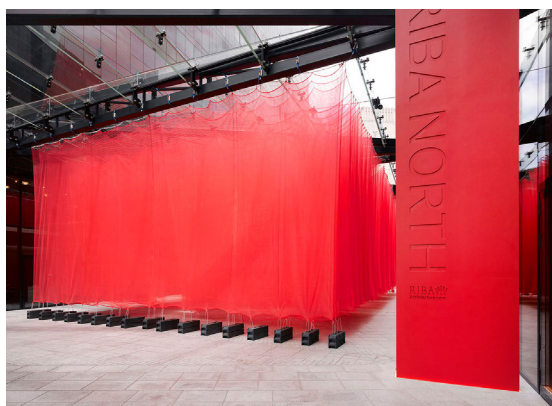


Figure 12: Un-veiled, internal view, Liverpool, UK.
(KHBT Architects; image courtesy of KHBT Architects).

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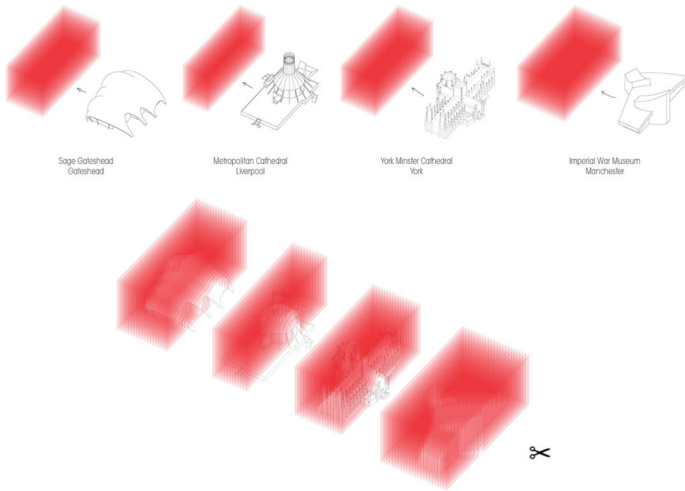


Figure 13: Un-veiled, opening scenography for RIBA North, concept diagram, Liverpool, UK.
(KHBT Architects; image courtesy of Johannes Marburg).

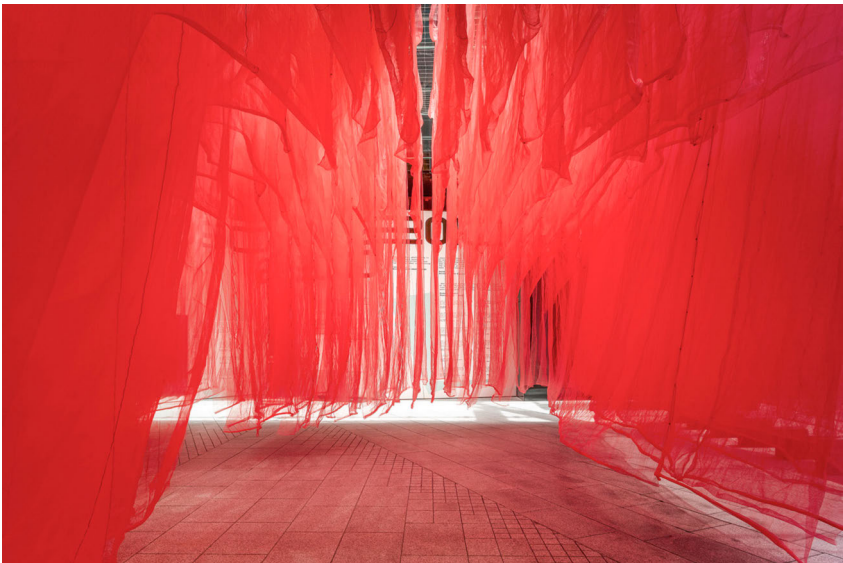


Figure 14: Un-veiled, internal view, Liverpool, UK.
(KHBT Architects; image courtesy of Johannes Marburg).

4 Conclusion

The incremental crafting of ideas into detailed structures reflects the process of “thinking and not thinking,” a process of progressive refinement towards the goal of defining the essential. The essential will be experienced by raising the curiosity of the receiver. Spatial work could be seen as inhabitable sculptures or sculptural habitats. As Alexandra Stara states in *Curating Architecture and the City*: “The projects of *osa* are generated directly as a response to site, as an attempt to enrich it through degrees of ‘fictionalisation.’ The difficulty of transposing the play of fiction into an architectural context lies not only in the solidity of building, but also in the responsibility to address purpose and function in an encompassing but non-descriptive way. In other words, a building needs to be inhabited, and this inhabitation, although purposeful, should not be subject to the restrictions of a simplistic narrative or representational one-liners” (Chaplin & Stara, 2009).

This is when art and architecture meet and when narratives go beyond a spatial consideration by exploring and opening up imagination through the means of space.

5 References

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