

Reflections on Commonplaces and the Domesti-city

SARAH WIGGLESWORTH
Kingston University

“...criticism of life consists in studying the margin which separates what men are from what they think they are and what they live from what they think.”

- Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, vol 1.
translated by John Moore. London: Verso 1991.

PROLOGUE

This paper examines a studio project in which students begin by designing detailed elements of a building at full scale and work from this towards a planning strategy. Such a process proposes a re-adjustment of the role habitually played by technological investigations within the studio design process. The study shows how the detail can play a major role in the ordering of the design at an initial stage, and how careful recording of the work in progress fosters discussion of the role of representation, documentation and method. The process as a whole sheds light on how the ‘practice’ of architecture may be raised as an issue within the curriculum.

THE EVERYDAY

The theoretical basis for the project discussed owes to writers on the Everyday, principally Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre. The work of my studio draws in particular on the distinction outlined by de Certeau between strategies and tactics:

“I call a strategy the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated. It postulates a place that can be delimited as its own and serve as a base from which exteriority composed of targets or threats (customers or competitors, enemies, the country surrounding the city, objectives and objects of research, etc.) can be managed.”¹

Architectural design, as it is usually practised under modernist methodology, starts with the macro scale (masterplans, urban planning etc), is followed by progressive stages through general arrangement, elemental design

and working drawings, and ends with the detail. Technical information is supposed to reinforce the strategic concepts, carrying their ideas through to the material in a coherent and transparent way. Implicit in this is the reliance on the master narrative of the original move as a dominating and unifying force. Architectural drawings privilege certain aspects of design, such as measure and scale, outline rather than surface, construction rather than finish. The use of this language signifies and confers order, expertise and control. Such drawings sanction abstraction, becoming a private language used by architects to communicate between themselves or with other building professionals.

A sense of control inheres to the concept of what architecture is—and what it is to be an architect. So it is in the realm of Everyday things—where the chaotic, the mundane and the commonplace occur—that the architect’s control and expertise are challenged. In the design of the home and in particular, the domestic interior, personal (often female) taste, social and personal aspiration and individual notions of identity problematise the “professional” basis on which architects’ decisions are made. The domestic interior is a battleground in which the values of one culture (the user) clash with the pre-conceptions of the professional. This is a territory in which, as the feminist maxim goes, the personal becomes the political.

The design of “social” housing is perhaps one of the clearest demonstrations of this problem. In Britain, popular myth now equates mass housing with spectacular failure, proving in the public mind that housing never should have been the business of architects, and perhaps even more emphatically, that architects are distanced, arrogant aesthetes, uninterested in the people who are obliged to inhabit their buildings. Thus, a program for mass housing draws into focus issues concerning the Everyday and the role of the architect in relation to both society and the conditions of architectural knowledge and production.

The premise behind the studio project is that architecture’s mechanisms for control, such as our reliance on the idea of the masterplan as an ordering device, or the basis of our professional distancing from an end user, can be categorised

as strategies according to de Certeau's definition. By the same definition, clients and users are "threats" which such systems attempt to "manage." The failure of such strategies in the arena of housing, however, demand a critique of such strategies. Our work preys on this framework, using its evident flaws to posit an alternative approach employing tactical action. A tactic is "a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus." It plays the "other" to the laws imposed on it, taking advantage of opportunities offered by the "cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers."²

THE PROGRAM

The studio program, carried out in the session 1994-5, 'poaches' on the territory of mastery, using the detail to interrogate areas of power and control. It posits an approach which inverts the conventional sequence of moves, working from the design of a full scale (1:1) domestic object outwards towards the site plan.

The Domestic Object

The project began with the design of a familiar domestic object, allocated at random (wall, sanitary ware, storage, window, table, porch etc). The program introduced the domestic object at the very outset, confronting immediately issues connected with materiality, use, manufacture, taste and signification. A project which makes the choice of technical approach part of the "design," of necessity makes questions of aesthetics, production, skills and finish play an integral role in the development of ideas, rather than a chore added to the project to satisfy professional demands. In the domestic object, issues ranging from sexual politics and economics to aspiration and surface are made immediate and accessible. While our focus on the object recalled the Corbusian interest in the *objet type*, we were suspicious of the idea that an object could be in a purified state of evolution. Our own aim was to contaminate the object, questioning critically the preconceptions behind familiar design models. As a way of generating ideas we used a number of chosen texts through which to engage revisionist notions about the domestic interior.

The Detail

Working at the small scale privileged the detail over the grand gesture. This theme operated on various levels: first, by considering the object before the site plan; second, through our insistence that students first make their object at full size in order for them to understand how to construct their work; third, through constant reference to the specific, real, social implications of the design. In this sense, the detailed approach asks the designer to acknowledge the human activity associated with the place of the object. The program deliberately set out to question the fetishisation of the object by situating it in a social and productive context. Since the designer was asked to make the object s/he had designed, the

work had to recognise the conditions of its own production and students had to adjust their own goals and conceptions in the light of this reality. The designer became implicated in the process of design, forcing her or him to confront personal desires, sometimes as a valuable and enjoyable aspect of the design process, and sometimes as questionable baggage.

Documentation

An important part of making sense of the design procedure was to record the process of its development. The act of recording brings to consciousness many moves which have been made subconsciously or techniques uncritically absorbed. It allows the student to gather material which can be re-evaluated at a later stage, building up a story line about the ideas *after* the design has taken place. It admits the practice, and the value, of constructing a narrative and an architectural persona as a legitimate and prevalent procedure in the representation of architecture and the architect (for example, at reviews or at client or public presentations).

We asked each student carefully to record the process of making the object as s/he followed through its construction. The recording of the *process* gives equal status to the work leading to the finished product and the completed object itself. This is not because we wish the student to value the craft of making *per se*, but rather to document the accidents and changes in intention that take place as a result of design-through-making. As you might expect, many obstacles were discovered during the production of the object and the designs were adapted accordingly. These varied from the student discovering s/he did not possess the required skills to make the object her/himself (in which case s/he had to change the production method or have someone else fabricate it), through misunderstanding a property of a material or its ability to perform in the way anticipated, through programming problems (running out of time), to having to find a cheaper alternative to the design problem because of financial limitations. Many of these issues are realities of the construction process in building buildings and this parallel was raised during discussions in the studio. Later, a written report was used to reflect upon such issues and provide a vehicle for documenting the project.

The Full Scale Working Drawing

The working drawing was given priority over the presentation drawing during this process. The purpose of the program that we developed was to question the value system which privileges the conceptual sketch (the realm of ideas) over the working drawing (manual trades), revealing the working drawing as the true locus of the design decisions. We asked the students to make full scale drawings of the design before building started, to record changes to the design during construction, and later to make a record survey of the completed object. The idea was to trace developments in the design over the course of construction.

Sketch designs were largely absent from the design process, and were replaced by drawings, collages, montages and techniques of détournement which combined construction and idea in a loaded way. The students leapt quickly from these initial ideas-drawings into full-scale constructional explorations. Sometimes a student had no knowledge of available products or techniques and was directed to the technical library, local builders' merchants or to specific manufacturers in the quest for first-hand information - and hands-on knowledge. The Do-It-Yourself "self-build" culture prevalent in Britain is invaluable for helping the students confront their lack of knowledge. Students can browse the shelves of the superstores examining the basic components of plumbing, carpentry and other trades. The learning curve is steep but confidence builds proportionately.

We insisted on working at full scale for a number of reasons. One of these is that it stops the student from adopting a feeling of superiority—therefore of mastery—towards the object under scrutiny. As a condition of relative size, the object and the student are more or less equals, each one challenging the other for control. At the physical level, the whole body of the student, as well as the mind, is engaged in the production of the drawing, not only because the pages often become large and unwieldy to manipulate, but also because they stand in comparison to the body of the student as true representations of the scale of the object.³ Judgements about thicknesses and proportions are instantly revealed—for better or worse. Decisions avoided or not fully comprehended come home to haunt the maker later on. In this sense the project is analogous to construction in architectural practice. In addition to raising issues of control and judgement, students learn that builders are skilled workers whose knowledge they can benefit from. A desire for collaboration begins to develop, respect for the contractor increases and in general the stereotype of the arrogant architect is undermined.

Site

As part of the sequence of events the students were asked to take their object to the site and to use it as a means of extending the particular issues it dealt with to the scale of the site itself. This allowed the student to imagine the site with a new outlook unencumbered by the usual rules of site analysis. The students were asked to use this information to invent strategies for re-envisioning the site and in the final move, the housing units themselves. The goal was to stall the students' inherited tendency to resort to the conventions of site analysis and planning, and to allow the ideas about dwelling generated by the domestic object to inform their moves in ways they were unable to predict at the outset. The site used was the run-down Burgess Park in South London.

Tactics of Design

While the students were encouraged to develop ideas in a variety of ways—through formal manipulation, through

theory, and so on—they were required to think hard about the implications of their actions and the ways in which these could be interpreted to direct the project. Allowing the haphazard and the playful to occur, but learning how to exploit them, was a crucial factor in realising fully the capabilities of this approach. Thus the project also draws on another familiar aspect of the Everyday, the notion of "pulling tricks" (to cite de Certeau again). For the tactic "is a guileful ruse" and

"through procedures that Freud makes explicit with reference to wit, a tactic boldly juxtaposes diverse elements in order suddenly to produce a flash shedding a different light on the language of a place..."⁴

Although the project assumes the strategy of inverting conventional design methods, the actual design process takes place in a tactical way. Because it starts from the "other" end, so to speak, the project challenges the notion of the known outcome, it admits issues of formal pleasure into the design equation and it engages with the idea of the *objet type* not as an addendum in which architecture is seen as primary, and object as secondary, but in which the two have equal roles in engaging social issues. However, it is important to say that although the process can allow for the willful move, the result is far from willful. We demand that each student examine their previous work and interpret it in the light of rigorous cross-questioning. Reflection on work completed is essential in order to make sense of it and to suggest future moves. In this way the designer is compelled not only to confront the implications of her/his own knowledge and desires in the design process, but also to make readings of her/his work as an architectural product.

THE PROJECT

The Patchwork Porch

In the example I want to describe, the work of Barnaby Johnston, the item allocated was the Porch. Barnaby became interested in the way in which the Porch is a space which is neither inside nor outside. A "communicating" space, it looks both ways—anticipating the interior when one is outside, and the exterior when one is inside. In this sense it contains qualities of both the interior and the exterior. Barnaby wanted to celebrate this ambiguity.

To this end he began to explore the use of needlework and weaving as a means of construction. In this way he was able to bring female, domestic technology to the outside. He became fascinated by the way that patchwork, usually employed for quilts, makes use of scrap material, worn garments and left-overs, recycling and extending their useful life. He scoured second-hand shops and began to construct his porch out of old clothes hung from a timber frame. The frame was made of lightweight timber sections woven together, hung from the wall of the house to emphasise its temporary nature. The exterior of the porch was weather-proofed using material normally used for shower curtains.



Fig. 1. Fragment of the Patchwork Porch

Implied by the garments themselves are the fragmented figures of women, men and children. Barnaby used images of people communicating with each other to organise the arrangement of garments in the porch, though the final result is not “pictorial.” Rather, human contact and dialogue is implicit.

In order to stress this Barnaby padded the porch, stuffing it in various places so it would touch the body as one passed by. He also sewed into the porch interior several pockets which could hold items of clothing such as gloves, shoes or hats, discarded on the way in. Thus the real porch fabric and the items of daily use become undifferentiated. The patchwork was recorded using a paper pattern, which included a set of instructions for the erection of the porch.

When the porch was taken to the site, several issues became prominent. One which arose immediately was an interest in the interactions between human beings, and especially the ways in which the presence of human activity “marks” or leaves traces upon, the environment. In the porch this had been expressed both in the clothing signifying the corporeal presence of a former wearer, as well as in the physical contact the body made as it passed through the porch. On the site, however, the visible traces of human contact were both more permanent and more aggressive. The site showed many signs of activity, frequently expressed as vandalism.

Barnaby saw a parallel in the way people care for their environment and the way they care for each other. His attention returned to the violence people show towards other people. Person-to-person crime was evident both as visible and condoned (London’s most famous boxing school was nearby), and as invisible and not condoned, such as domestic violence (a situation he discovered by attending local residents’ meetings). He identified these conditions with a problem of masculinity. He decided to develop a form of housing which was to accommodate males with a history of domestic violence, incorporating into the program an agenda for rehabilitating the tenants through conditions of mutual support, care, neighbourliness, and self-surveillance.

Instead of enforcing isolation and privacy, his aim was to develop an erasure of boundaries in order to encourage such

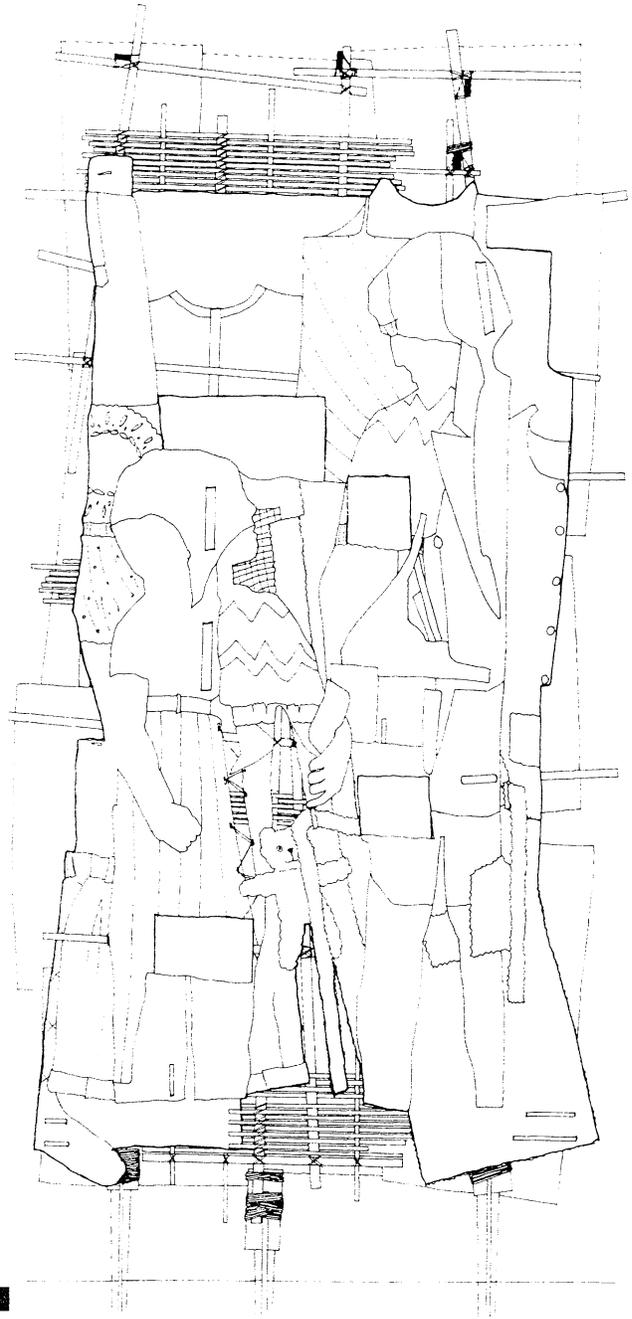


Fig. 2. Cross section through the Patchwork Porch.

men to take an active role in negotiating their own personal identity and space, and to develop a sense of responsibility and caring towards other people and the environment which seemed poignantly absent from the existing urban condition.

His starting point was the back-to-back house, a dwelling type common to his native Scotland and notorious for poor light, little air and cramped spaces. Barney’s strategy was to make a “conversion” of a typical unit, in order to reclaim the negative aspects of the back-to-back, as well as to adapt its spatial arrangements to maximise the boundary of each dwelling. The conversions took place both in plan and in section. The units overlap and cross one another in a complex

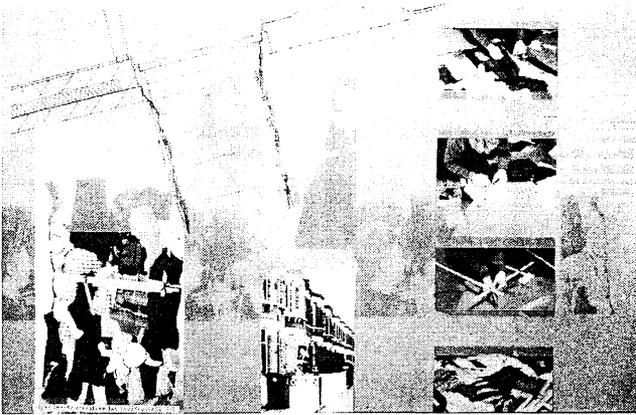


Fig. 3. Composite drawing showing the Patchwork Porch in situ and during fabrication.

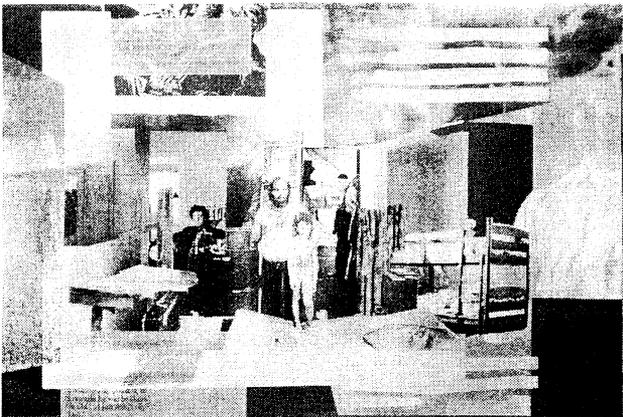


Fig. 4. Family unit: exploring masculinity.

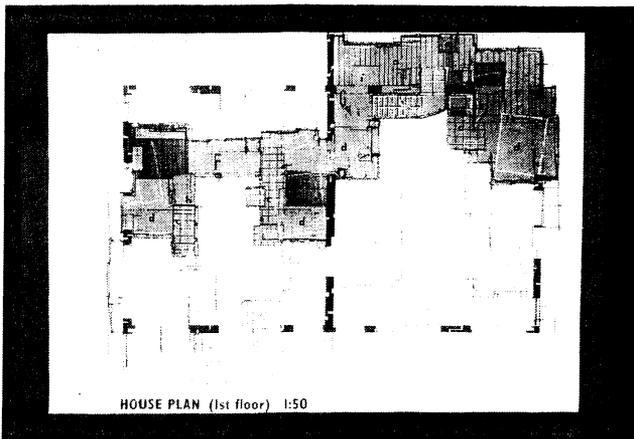


Fig. 5. Conversion of the back-to-back (tonal area represents one unit).

spatial jigsaw which is organised by attempts to maximise social contact and visual surveillance across the boundary wall.

To examine the possibilities for inter-unit contact, Barnaby began to investigate the precise conditions of the boundary between dwellings. At this point the Patchwork Porch project was resurrected as a model for a new form of boundary wall construction which recognised the inside/outside nature of the party wall as well as the presence of the body.

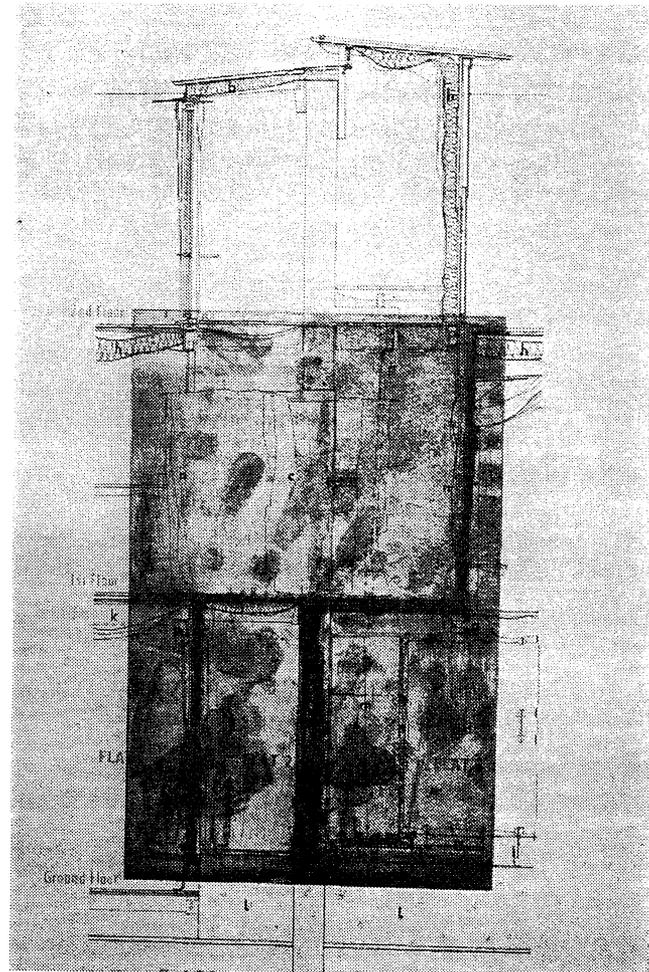


Fig. 6. Etching showing detail through the fabric boundary wall.

Based on his work on the Porch, Barnaby designed a fabric wall which was suspended from the ceiling, incorporating a fire curtain and acoustic control but allowing for a certain "transparency" because the wall yielded when people passed it on either side. By reinventing the boundary between units as soft and adaptable, he showed how the presence of this sort of architecture could indicate and accommodate a variety of different social events on both sides, and between, the party wall.

The final stage of the process was to establish the site plan. Barney accepted the traditional form of the back-to-back as a terrace, turning his attention instead to the blurring of the boundaries between public and private space. Careful studies of inside and outside, of threshold conditions and of visibility enabled him to develop a new language of layout and material based on collective ownership, negotiation and responsibility.

Many of the drawings adopt the idea, deriving from the site, of traces left on a surface as a sign of human expression. Barney made many drawings as etchings, a process which required scraping away at a waxed metal plate and then biting it in acid. He also made lino cuts, and etched glass—other forms of aggression towards a material. Thus the

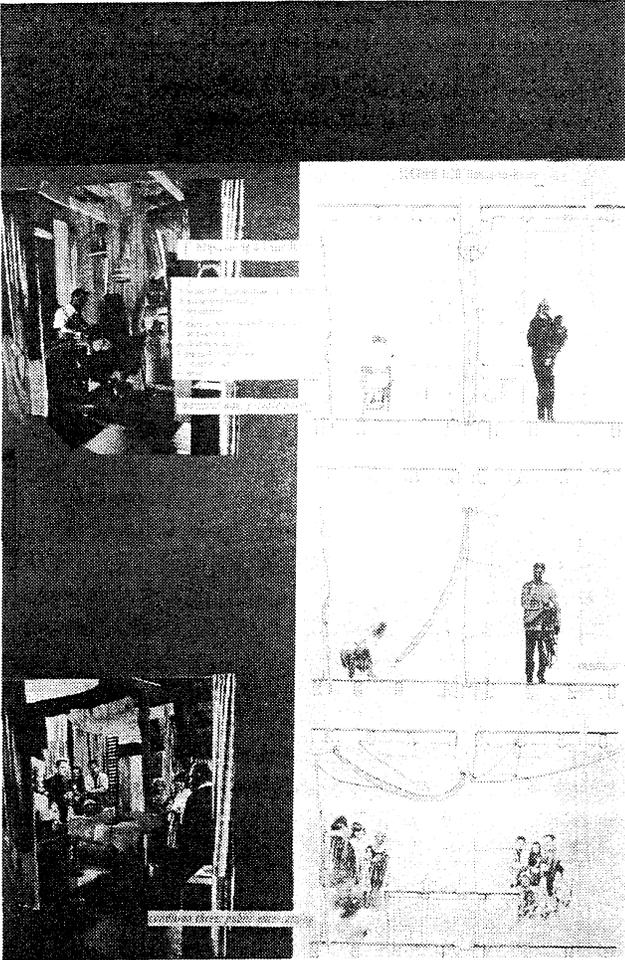


Fig. 7. Social intercourse across the boundary wall.

original idea behind the project is embodied in the materiality of the process of drawing itself.

CONCLUSION

I have shown an example of how working in reverse can produce issue-based and unusual formal propositions rather

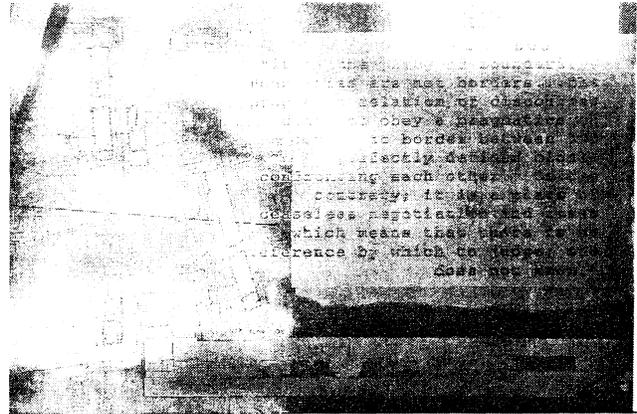


Fig. 8. Etching showing site plan.

than a replication of standard urban typologies. More important, perhaps, is the fact that this approach begins to problematise the architect's cosy relationship with the forces of professional and social control that govern our work. It is impossible for any of us to escape such conditions, be they apparently benign or downright repressive. Better, then, to acknowledge their existence, and our complicity with it, and devise ways of approaching the problems they represent. I believe that such strategies lead to empowerment for architects and students alike. I want to create a paradigm shift in our thinking about architecture, and I believe this is a small way of doing it.

NOTES

- ¹ de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Rendall, Steven, London and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, pp. 35-6.
- ² *ibid.* p. 37.
- ³ See Cardinal-Pett, Clare. "Detailing". In *Desiring Practices*, eds. McCorquodale, Duncan, Rüedi, Katerina and Wigglesworth, Sarah. London: Black Dog Publishing, 1995, pp. 88-105.
- ⁴ de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Rendall, Steven, London and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, pp. 37-8.