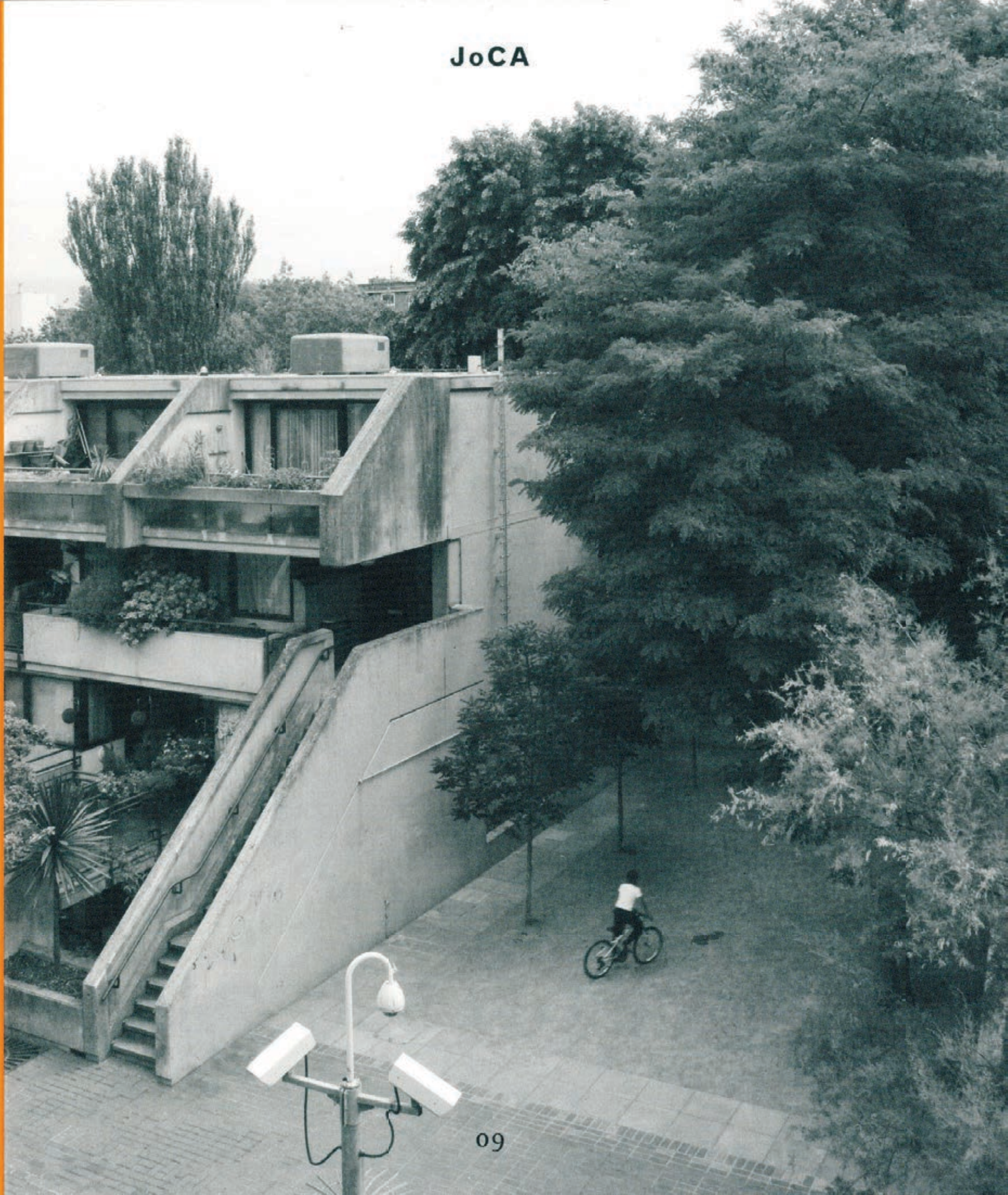


JoCA





Episodes and Incidents: From Hotel Palenque to Aalto's Italian Grill

Andrew Carr

'Nature is never finished.'¹
Robert Smithson

'Form is nothing else but a desire for eternal life on earth.'²
Alvar Aalto

'I figure that the approach will be entirely different this time: no scaffolding; scarcely a brick to be seen; all crepuscular, but the heart, the passion, humour, everything as bright as fire in the mist.'³
Virginia Woolf

Alvar Aalto and Robert Smithson seldom occupy the same sentence. Here they are placed alongside each other, in dialogue, to explore their shared concerns with temporality, form, appearance and disappearance. Aalto was born forty years before Smithson and outlived him by three years. As far as I am aware the two never met, though Aalto had regularly visited America since the 1930s, around the time Smithson was born in New York, completing projects such as the undulating Baker House at MIT, where he also served as a visiting professor.

What follows emerges from a reflection on a single work by Smithson known as *Hotel Palenque*. Here he evokes a place through a series of partial representations, or episodes. His framing scaffolds a whole from these parts and imbues them with a temporal ambiguity. These three themes of framing, episode and temporality inform a re-reading of Aalto and tentatively ruminate on an assembled architecture where the whole might not be deduced from its parts.

HOTEL PALENQUE

Reinforcement bars project from the ragged edges of what have been or will become floors. A distant treeline is framed by an opening formed from a lintel spanning between two masonry piers covered with a patina of what looks like dirt. More rebar spills out in all directions. Sheets hang haphazardly from rows of timber trusses that form a roof open to the sky. How did the sheets get there and why is there a chair below, on the edge of a curved step?

These words describe photographs taken by Robert Smithson during a visit to Hotel Palenque in the Yucatán Peninsula, New Mexico, in 1969. He stayed there with his artist-partner Nancy Holt and gallerist Virginia Dwan, using his camera to document the ambiguous state of the hotel. Part occupied, part ruin and part finished, it is difficult to understand it as whole. Spaces seem incidental and episodic. Tiled 'finishes' rest alongside newer poured concrete columns, with rebar projecting skyward, that grow next to rooms

that seem to have once been used for something, with paint on the walls but their roofs missing. Piles of rubble co-exist with stacks of hollow concrete blocks. Makeshift timber ramps give access to upper floors. We are unsure if the hotel is being built but is not finished, was built but is now being re-built or was found as a ruin and is now being occupied, restored or is in the process of becoming something else entirely. Traces of inhabitation are few. No-one appears in the photographs and little in the way of furniture is apparent, adding to an uncertain sense of whether the hotel is occupied or abandoned.

As photographs it is hard to get a sense of the whole, to understand how one space relates to another, how each incidental detail relates to the next. They appear almost like the camera roll from an architect's site visit, documenting the process of construction, taken to record problems and issues—a joinery detail not lining through, an overlooked relationship, a clash—with little forethought for their aesthetic or narrative qualities. They are focussed, limited views that crop out all else. Smithson drew a plan of the hotel which helps us understand a bit more. An L-shaped building is revealed with a colonnade connecting rooms around a courtyard. Many of the labels on the plan echo the photos: 'under construction', 'unknown', 'unexplored', 'broken roof, hanging plastic', 'rubble' and 'broken concrete'. [2, 3]

A few years later, in 1972, he gave a lecture on the hotel to architecture students at the University of Utah using his photographs. He showed around thirty slides in all, providing a commentary on each. The slides began outside, situating the hotel on a dust road, before entering the building and exploring it. He describes the hotel as lacking a centre, 'or you might try to find a center in this place but you really can't, you know, because it's so de-differentiated, and so to the logic of the place is just impossible to fathom.' Slide by slide different parts of the building complex are presented to the students. Each view is square in format and tightly cropped; beyond a few obvious pairs most slides cannot be related to one another, or even be connected to the same building. As Smithson describes each part of the hotel he makes references and comparisons between parts of the hotel and aspects of Mayan culture and history: 'the rainforest', 'pre-Spanish times', and 'Palenque ruins, the temples, The Mayan observatories'. Areas of the hotel might be 'burial pits' or 'snake pits'; An unfilled swimming pool 'calls up the fears and dreads of... human sacrifice and mass laughter'. He notes that 'My feeling is that this hotel is built with the same spirit that the Mayans built their temples'.⁴ The tone of the lecture is wry and mischievous, clearly suggesting that the ramshackle hotel is perhaps of more importance and interest than the nearby ancient temple. Smithson describes it as

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1 Aalto's House in Munkkiniemi, Helsinki, under renovation in 2002.

2 A selection of Robert Smithson's photographs of Hotel Palenque, 1969. © Holt/Smithson Foundation / DACS, London

3 Robert Smithson, Map of the Hotel Palenque, 1969. © Holt/Smithson Foundation / DACS, London

'de-architecturalized'.⁵ Other artists have since gone on to develop work from Smithson's visit. Jeremy Millar visited in 1999 and photographed the hotel from the same points of view as Smithson, using two cameras. He placed one undeveloped film in a safety deposit box in the hotel and checked out the next day, leaving the film in the box. He then exhibited the contact sheet of the second film and safety deposit box receipt.⁶

At *Hotel Palenque* ambiguity is everywhere: From Smithson's slides it is hard to understand the hotel—to appreciate how one part relates to another and to get a sense of the whole. A temporal ambiguity is established between ruination and building/re-building. It is a collage of episodes and incidents selectively assembled by Smithson and overlaid with his commentary which draws in references to the more distant history of Mayan culture and temples. Whilst it is clearly a description of a particular place, the photographs grounding our understanding of it as such, it is Smithson's description, so is subjective, if not fictive. He has assembled our understanding and experience of *Hotel Palenque*, establishing a complex weave of temporalities, framed through slides and words at a lecture in the past, to which we were not present, describing a visit he made in his past. As author, I too have framed the hotel to you as a reader.

This framing of the hotel resonates with many of Smithson's other works. His 'nonsites' series attempt to create 'miniature universes' through a combination of documents—typically maps; samples—such as rocks from the terrain depicted in the map; and bins which act as frames and containers of the samples. The scale of his large earthworks contrasts with this contained universe which can sit within the frame of a gallery.⁷ It plays out too in some of his written documents such as 'Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of space'. Here the four pages, already frames in themselves, contain a rectangle of text surrounded by a solid line and a constellation of visual references and quotations, from ancient structures, artworks and diagrams to Proust, Heidegger, John Cage, Norbert Wiener and George Kubler. Through this scatter of references, in 'ultramundane margins', he ruminates on time, visually and verbally, using 'indeterminate information' and 'reproduced reproductions'.⁸ Concerns with entropy, process and time are manifest in his wider body of work too: his *Partially Buried Woodshed* of 1970 placed twenty truckloads of earth onto an abandoned wooden shed causing it to collapse. In 1969 *Asphalt Rundown* poured a truck of hot asphalt down an embankment, cooling and hardening as it fell to capture a form mid-flow. His *Spiral Jetty* of 1970 constructed a curving rocky line out onto the Great Salt Lake in Utah, which has disappeared and re-appeared since, covered in salt crystals. In an essay 'A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey' (1967), he describes industrial monuments as 'ruins-in-reverse' and 'memory-traces of an abandoned set of futures'.⁹ His 'Entropy and the New Monuments' wondered why 'Instead of causing us to remember the past like the old monuments, the new monuments seem to cause us to forget the future.'¹⁰

Smithson's framing of the hotel serves as a well placed architectural critique—direct architectural comparisons, that work with ambiguity, fiction and time in this way, are hard to find. Clients generally prefer that their buildings stand up, not collapse; keep the weather out, rather than leak; and be completed, not left unfinished—



they should remain looking good for a long time rather than patinating, fading and deteriorating. That said, architects are often fascinated by ruins—but *Hotel Palenque* evokes more than this. It suggests an architecture of episodes and incidents, temporally ambiguous and not necessarily organised according to an overarching discipline or order. It also suggests that a place can be authored from a selective handling of individual parts that suggest a collective whole. Often a logic pervades the design of a building such that each part of it should relate clearly, perhaps systematically, to another to create a unity. Somehow the door handle might suggest the building and vice-versa. This could take many forms: A grid might organise, modules repeat, a motif recur, junctions and corners could be handled in a consistent way, materials might assume particular roles or spaces and volumes align in a considered relationship with one another. Such attributes might be considered the constituents of architecture itself, without which a work would be lacking. Three years prior to Smithson's hotel stay a related critical architectural line was established through the publication of Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* which shares some common ground. An 'Obligation Toward the Difficult Whole' is described that might be achieved through ambiguity, double-functioning and both-and elements, citing the work of a diverse range of often 'Mannerist' architects as examples, including Michelangelo and Borromini, through Hawksmoor and Soane to Lutyens and Aalto.¹¹

Smithson's architectural critique, articulated through *Hotel Palenque*, shares some of these concerns and pre-occupations but seems to push elsewhere. It enjoys a disjointed whole over a 'difficult' one. Rather than drawing diverse elements together into a considered composition, in a fixed architectural object, Palenque is something else. It is temporally ambiguous too, not in the sense of historical reference, eclecticism or collage, but as a place subject to ongoing discontinuity and incompleteness, evoked through Smithson's subjective frame of reference where parts, considered in turn, accumulate to form a whole, but each part does not suggest this whole.

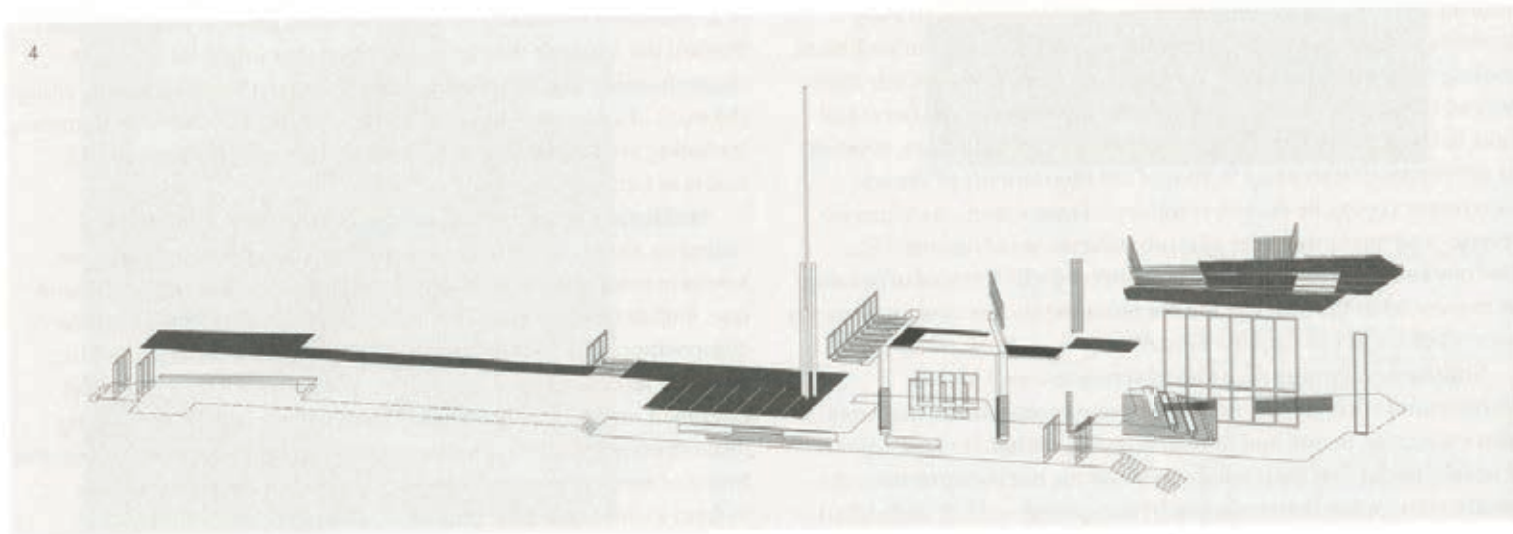
AALTO

Something similar is suggested by Juhani Pallasmaa in a description that frames the work of Aalto:

In this episodic architecture, Aalto suppresses the dominance of a singular visual image. This is an architecture that is not dictated by a single conceptual idea down to the last detail, but which grows through separate architectural scenes, episodes and detail inventions. The whole is held together by the contract of an emotional atmosphere, an architectural key, as it were, instead of an overpowering intellectual concept.¹²

Typically a building of Aalto will present a diverse range of incidental and apparently unconnected elements. One material might layer over another at an entrance, an array of timbers form a partial ceiling plane before shifting direction, alignment, spacing or height. Rhythms are established, syncopated and broken, materials shift and details are handled incidentally and individually. Handrails vary between floors, change in material along their length and swerve around columns. [4, 5]

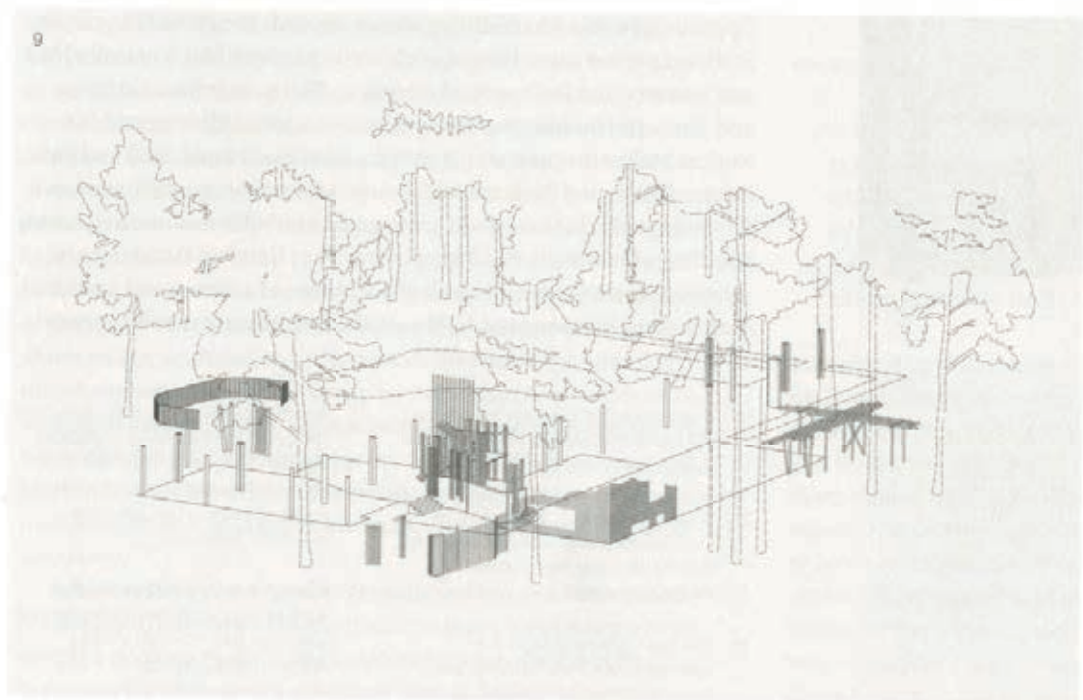
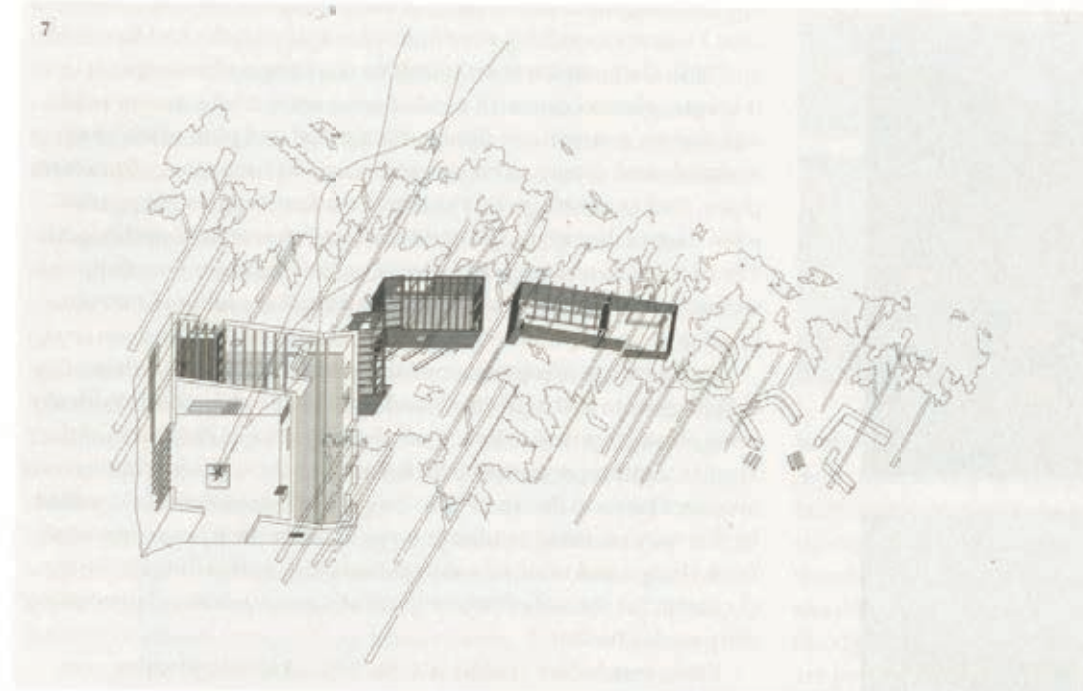
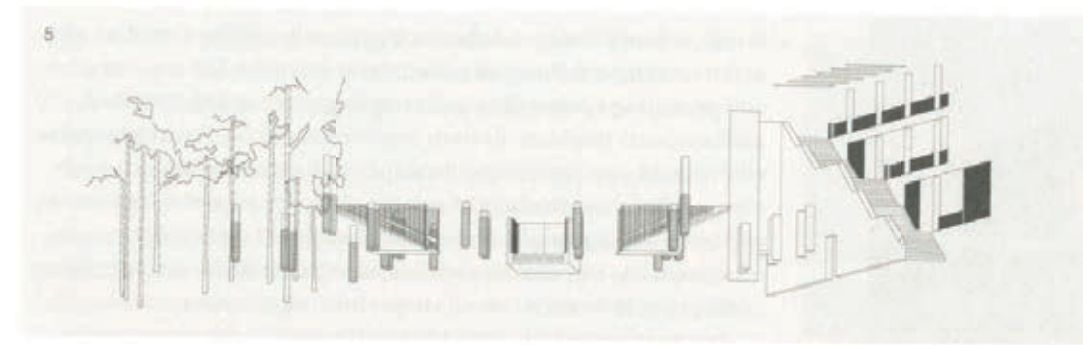
Discussions of Aalto's work frequently use terms like 'painterly' and 'episodic', describing it as 'collage' rather than a unified system.¹³ Materials and details might draw on vernacular precedents, others industrial and modern; collectively diverse episodes and incidents suggest a thickened present rather than a homogenous work completed all at once. Ambiguity is created in built forms poised somewhere between the apparently growing or eroding and ruined, consumed by plants weaving through arrays of timber poles. The implication is that the old and new, the decayed and finished, co-exist within one work. His Experimental House, at Muuratsalo near Jyväskylä, is handled as a series of structures that loosen, lighten and adjust to topography, shifting from brick to timber and dissipating into, or perhaps growing from, the surrounding birch and pine forest. The house appears as an ongoing work, perhaps still under construction, or perhaps being reclaimed by the forest.¹⁴ [6, 7, 8]



Even where a 'system' or pattern might be discerned it is undermined; his combinations of materials, details and form work hard to avoid 'artificial architectural rhythm'.¹⁵ The linear rhythms that permeate many of his buildings and resonate with the vertical rhythm of the forest are not expressed uniformly. At Villa Mairea, regular structural grids are syncopated and confused with double, triple, and sloping columns combined with a palette of varied bindings and materials. The use of timber poles in relatively unworked, raw states, combine with glazed dabs of crisp blue tile, modern lines and steel columns. [9]

What becomes apparent is that the work often holds numerous graduations together in tension: order and entropy, growth and decay, raw and refined, old and new, geometric and informal. These dialectics are less a unifying or insistent idea than a loose compositional strategy that embraces the contingent and incomplete.¹⁶ Multiple, smaller individual episodes are combined to form an open, perhaps dis-continuous, composition.¹⁷ One episode might rhyme with another but the sequence is not inevitable, nor determined by what went before. By avoiding a single unifying structure or idea, the openness of the work invites the possibility of additions and modifications, perhaps inviting use or establishing a sense of the incomplete. More open ended forms of order might be considered too, like 'nature-coming-to-be' as it grows and adjusts to prevailing conditions or the relation of the buildings of an Italian hill town to topography to form a collective, almost self-ordering whole. In the same essay quoted earlier Pallasmaa suggests, questionably, that the civic complex at Seinäjoki might easily be understood as the work of many hands, built at different times. Richard Weston notes that 'Aalto sustains the fiction of a settlement grown over time by varying the treatments of the different parts of his buildings' at the Jyväskylä University campus.¹⁸

The resultant temporality is paradoxical. Whilst the work binds the seasonality of light, rain and snow, with the mid-tempos of construction and experiment, to the deeper histories of vernacular



4 Analytical worm's-eye drawing of linear elements along the main spine of Alajärvi Town Hall, Finland, by Alvar Aalto.

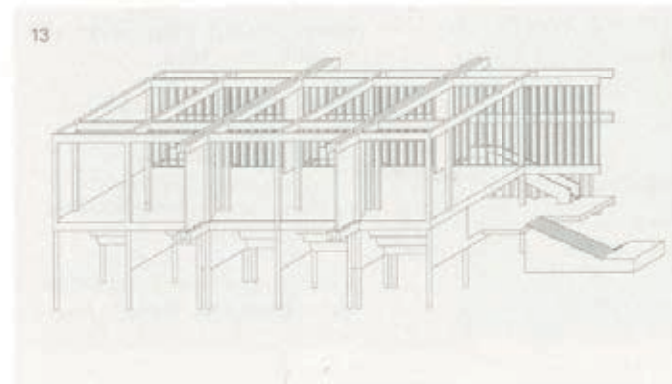
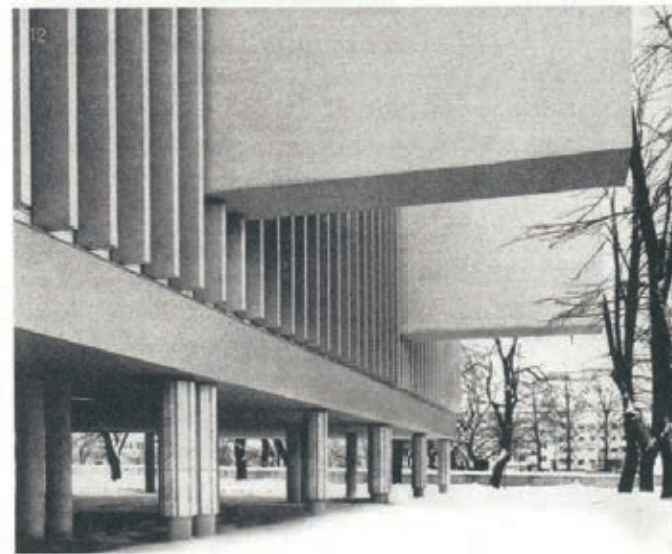
5 Analytical worm's-eye drawing of the entrance sequence to the main building at Jyväskylä University, Finland, by Alvar Aalto.

6 Vertical timber trellis to the side of the courtyard at the Experimental Brick House, Muuratsalo, Finland, by Alvar Aalto.

7 Analytical view of the Experimental Brick House, Muuratsalo, Finland, by Alvar Aalto, showing the square brick courtyard and the surrounding wings of the house which shift to a timber construction as they dissolve into, or emerge from, the forest.

8 The door handle of the sauna by the lakeside at the Experimental Brick House, Muuratsalo, Finland, by Alvar Aalto, blurring the distinction between constructed geometries and natural growing forms.

9 A study of linear elements at the Villa Mairea, Noormarkku, Finland, by Alvar Aalto.



forms and traditions, and the ancient presence of the forest, as an architectural work it remains atemporal, conceived in one instance and persisting unchanging in an ongoing present. Other episodes and incidents might easily have been added on the drawing board as elements of an open composition but are harder to add later, post-construction. The rhythms of season, use, entropy and maintenance will come and go but the architectural work will essentially remain unaltered. Its temporalities are bound together at the moment of its conception and execution—it simply hosts them as it persists.

Encounters with his built work challenge this framing of Aalto. Approaching the main building of the Jyväskylä University campus in 2002 I was not expecting what greeted me. Alvar Aalto had designed and built the complex of buildings on the campus from 1950-71. It seemed they were now in need of some work. The entrance road was dug up, contractors' signboards erected and piles of building materials and detritus were strewn around its base: doors, hardcore, pipes, timber sheeting and the like. A similar thing had happened a few days earlier when I visited Aalto's own home in Munkkiniemi. The noise of hammering and sawing echoed from an open door whilst more building waste, and a few door leaves, loitered outside. [1, 10, 11]

Not knowing otherwise, one might easily imagine that these buildings were still being built and were close to handover. Typically most photographs of Aalto's work show it in the endless days of the Finnish summer or perhaps, for balance, in the snow of winter. Never are they shown in disrepair—in the state of incompleteness implied by this 'ruined' form. No doubt many of his buildings are protected from change and maintained to prevent this, embroiling them in the temporal politics of preservation and conservation, perpetuating the paradox further.¹⁰

Four years before Smithson visited Hotel Palenque Aalto completed the Västmanlands-Dala Nation Student Building in Uppsala, Sweden. The building comes towards the end of his career, at a later period when he was working on projects like Finlandia Hall and has received little critical attention. The more romantic brick and domestic buildings of his own house in Munkkiniemi and his work at Maire, Muuratsalo, Jyväskylä, Säynätsalo Town Hall and Baker House, completed from the mid 1930s to the 1950s, are behind him. The collage of allusions to the vernacular, eroded forms and a painterly handling of materials has disappeared. The church at Otaniemi and its wider Parish Centre complex of buildings, of a library and town hall, mark a stepping stone to a bolder, white architecture that is explored

- 10 The entrance of the main building at Jyväskylä University, Finland, by Alvar Aalto, under renovation in 2002.
- 11 Facing the campus, the rear of the main building at Jyväskylä University, Finland, by Alvar Aalto, under renovation in 2002.
- 12 The open ground floor of the Västmanlands-Dala Nation Student Building in Uppsala, Sweden, Finland, by Alvar Aalto.

- 13 Analytical view of Västmanlands-Dala Nation Student Building in Uppsala, Sweden, Finland, by Alvar Aalto showing the undercroft, structure, series of glazed staircases and moveable partitions.
- 14 Examples of covers of the Beatles' White Album collected by Rutherford Chang as part of We Buy White Albums (2013-ongoing).

in Uppsala. Here a strong rectangular volume is raised above street level with dramatic, projecting volumes cantilevering from its facade of vertical fins. Unusually it retains and absorbs an existing building to one side of the site. [12, 13]

Drawings and earlier photographs of the building show the ground floor left open to the air, surrounding street and trees to create a sheltered gathering space, warmed by an external fireplace, creating a lobby to the interior defined by columns and scalloped soffits that support a large indoor space above. Three staircases rise from this space alongside double height mullioned glazed screens, to arrive in a large hall that can be subdivided with sliding screens that are stored in those projecting cantilevered volumes visible from the street. The blank faces of the cantilevers and other walls become grounds for the display of moving light and shadow, cast by the surrounding trees. At night the glazed staircase screens create blocks of illumination filtered back through these trees to the street.

Whilst the sliding screens might have anticipated the day-to-day changes in the events that the building might host, more recent interventions have changed the building in other ways. The ground floor undercroft has been enclosed to create more interior space, one end occupied by 'Aalto's Italian grill and garden' which spills out under awnings and umbrellas. The trees to one side have been felled, the ground dug up and parking bays constructed. These episodes were perhaps not on Aalto's mind when designing the building and do not appear in Pallasmaa's writings. They challenge the reverential framing of Aalto's romantic ruined forms as embracing incompleteness, engaging instead in something unanticipated. The architecture which gives witness to this change is not one of gradations and becoming which invites contributions, but one of whiteness and strong, robust forms.

On 22 November 1968, some months prior to Smithson's visit to Hotel Palenque and three years after Aalto completed the student building, the *White Album* was released by the Beatles. Its cover was just that, white. In contrast to the collaged, pop cover designed by Peter Blake for their previous album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, the *White Album* was a simple square plain white cover, designed by Richard Hamilton and blind embossed with the name of the Beatles and a serial number. These identical, manufactured items are now over fifty years old and are being collected by artist Rutherford Chang.²⁰ [14]

Like Aalto's student centre the pristine white square now speaks of the previous fifty years. Some covers have yellowed, others have damp stains, scuff marks or circular stains from cups and mugs that rhyme with the outline of the record within now visible on the surface of the cover. Strips of yellowing sellotape hold together the edges of others which become grounds for decoration—perhaps just a simple name written in a corner to identify its owner, a place to collect fab four stickers or a reliquary for a fan to express their adoration.

Like the student centre this personalisation and customisation is unlikely to have been anticipated. The plain cover was perhaps simply a reaction to the collage that had gone before, but has been widely appropriated as a blank canvas, for self expression



or simply as a register of the journey the object has taken since its manufacture. Any building will change over time. Aalto's mid-period buildings started with the broken and eroded as an invitation to change and incompleteness, yet did not change. The student centre is more pristine, and perhaps less precious and coveted, which has allowed it to change. Perhaps the mid-period buildings made the right assumptions about use and so do not need to change or are prevented from doing so by wider cultural forces of preservation and conservation.

EPISODES, FRAMES AND TEMPORALITY

'It is the presence of the quality of unity in architecture which marks the difference between an architectural composition and a haphazard arrangement of scattered architectural elements, which, if they may be dignified by the title 'conception', must be considered as representing a weak and incomplete idea of a necessarily low order.'²¹

This tentative exploration suggests some possibilities for understanding architecture as a collection of episodes and incidents. Framed by the architect and our experience of the work each episode is self contained in itself—a larger whole cannot be discerned from them individually, it is only created when multiple episodes are held together, however haphazard, weak, incomplete or lacking in unity as Howard Robertson's notes on architectural composition might assume. God is not found in the details. These are not 'whole-parts',²² to borrow from David Leatherbarrow's recent explorations, nor are they fragments²³ which would imply they are splinters from something else which might be re-assembled or a collage which takes part of

something from one place and places it in another, out of place. Nor are they necessarily a bricolage which borrows from that which might be available. Assemblage and montage are perhaps more useful terms.

The comparison of Aalto and Smithson has ruminated on the notion of an episode and their collective framing. Each episode might be held in a simple proximity, perhaps a sequence, in the case of our experience of a building, or the dialectics witnessed in Aalto, though these remain open and not systematic progressions where a gap might be spotted, making the part have a dependant relation to a series. This compositional strategy is not limited to Smithson and Aalto but can readily be found elsewhere.

An instructive example is the Villa Snellman, in Djursholm, Sweden, designed by Erik Gunnar Asplund and constructed in 1917-18. L-shaped in form the main wing of the house is three storeys in height with a lower single storey servant wing framing the entrance. Upon arrival little seems of note. The entrance facade is punctuated with four columns of windows and swag flourishes, with wide internals of plain, unadorned wall between. A delicate canopy projects above the entrance door and a stepped plinth extends to some glazed doors further along the facade. This restrained, modest entrance facade conceals a complex interior. At the doorway the facade has been thickened with cupboards and stairs to create a tapered hallway which runs along its length. Culminating in a staircase with a half landing, which itself tapers to suit the hallway, the space continues upstairs where the varying thickness of the tapered wall can be read in the depth of the window. Opposite the window the landing opens out into a curved space lined with timber. The modest exterior and rectangular form hold together each of these individual, interior incidents, which pull against the rectilinear form of their container. Windows on the garden facade do not line up as you might expect, but offset slightly to relate to the spaces inside. [15]

As such the house reads as a collection of short stories contained in a single volume. A similar approach was adopted by Virginia Woolf around the same time. Shorter pieces would become not just studies for longer works, but these longer works would become assemblies of shorter episodes, perhaps told at different times or from different points of view. *Jacob's Room*, published in 1922, is a case in point. Here Jacob is described from birth to death, from his point of view, but also of others at different points in his life. Multiple smaller narratives are held together within the lifetime structure of the book. Woolf would go on to develop this technique further in *To the Lighthouse* where multiple points of view and physical objects and spaces bracket interior monologues. [16]

It too could be a way of understanding the work of Eileen Gray at Tempe à Paille. Multiple items of furniture and intensively detailed window openings, shades, armatures and fittings combine to punctuate relatively simple surfaces and volumes, informing the use of each space. Occupation and episode intertwine; immersed inhabitants pull, push and turn to close an oculus, fold a chair into a ladder, adjust the height of a table, slide a screen, move a brise-soleil and extend the width of a wardrobe. Free of the burdens of

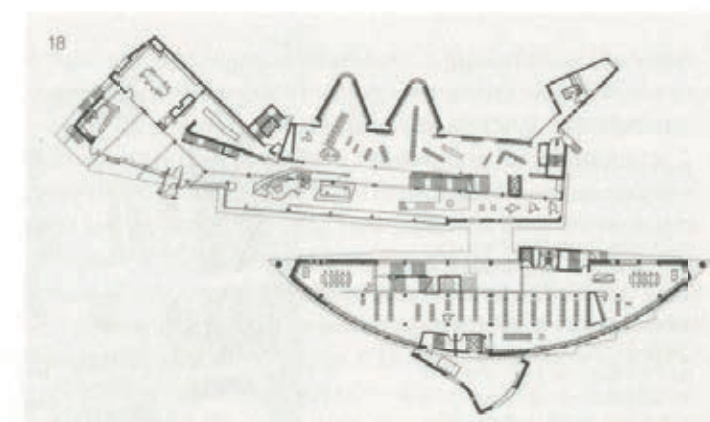
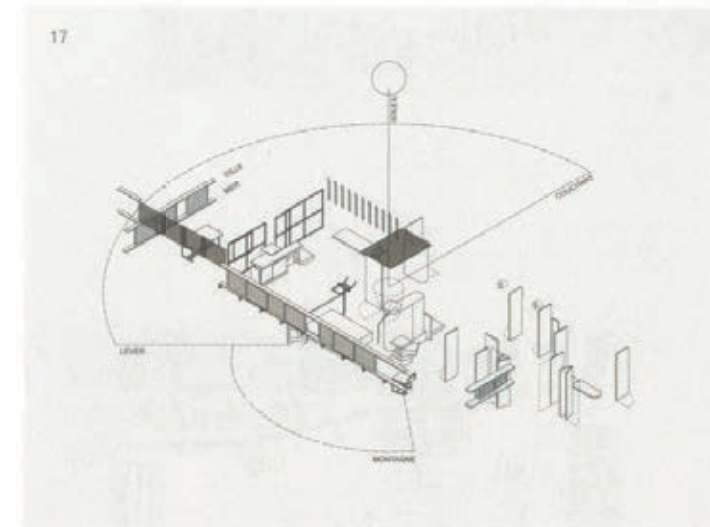
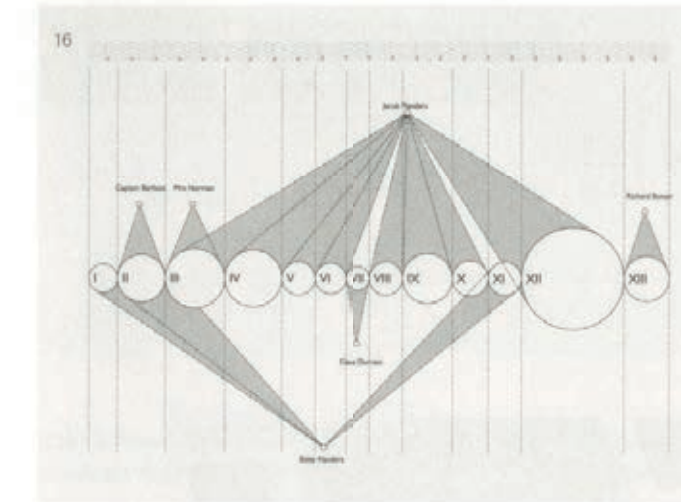
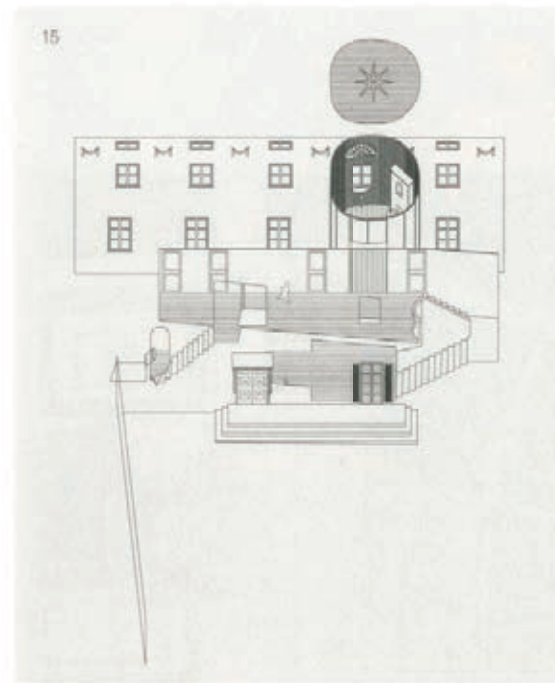
structure and system each episode is free to respond to contingencies, re-configurations and external events. [17]

The restless energy of this coterie echoes too with the very different output of Bolles Wilson at the Münster City Library. 'It's a library, it's a collection of details' declares Peter Wilson to try and describe the multiple smaller moments within the building. [18] The intensity their young practice brought to designing domestic projects is transferred to a civic scale. The building makes episodic interventions into the grain of the city, framing views to St.-Paulus-Dom, itself a collection of built forms which are overlaid with writhing, agitated details. Bay windows, canopies, V-shape columns and overshooting elements of roof syncopate the exterior while inside columns crank into beams, desks cut across spaces, balustrades extend into book ledges. Every element asserts its independence from the whole which is formed through assemblage imbued with a frantic, agitated, nervous energy. [18]

As a compositional approach it is hard to define clearly. On the one hand each part retains an independence and does not relate to the whole, but the assembly of multiple parts forms a whole, making it dependent on the part. The part is at once self contained but has a presence amongst others. It is the nature of this presence and relation to others that forms the 'architectural key', to borrow from Pallasmaa. The formation of these relationships is determined by the compositional approach of the architect. It might rely on a linear sequence or simultaneous co-presence but could simply also be an architectural judgement about placement, juxtaposition or a response to need and contingency.

When George R. Collins was translating Camillo Sitte's *City Planning According to Artistic Principles* [1889] he noted the difficulties of translating the German word *malerisch* which Sitte used to describe the urban effects which he liked. Collins notes that 'Sitte did not really mean 'picturesque' in the romantic sense, ... or 'painterly' as Wölfflin's concept is so often rendered, but rather 'pictorial'—structured like a picture possessing the formal values of an organising canvas'. [19] Such informal, seemingly unstructured and chance effects were, perhaps surprisingly, found to follow some rules of thumb in Sitte's analysis. Three key examples underpin the book, each gathering together diverse episodes in different ways: The Forum Romanum collects its various temples, basilicas and activities around an urban space, the Forum at Pompeii organises them more obviously using a perimeter colonnade whilst at the Acropolis independent structures are gathered on the same plateau. Diverse and contingent episodes are collected using the compositional devices of a gathering space, organising element and plateau. Sarah Menin notes something similar when comparing Aalto's approach to the 'gestural additive composition' of Karelian village settlements where the whole is created as a 'loose yoking together' of elements which is 'complete' at every stage of its morphology. [19]

Each episode assumes a temporal presence, which, when composed with others, implies a temporal structure. This might be linear, in the sense of a sequence of experiences along a route, a promenade architecturale, or could relate to the ongoing life within, and of, a building. It might rely on simultaneity too. When

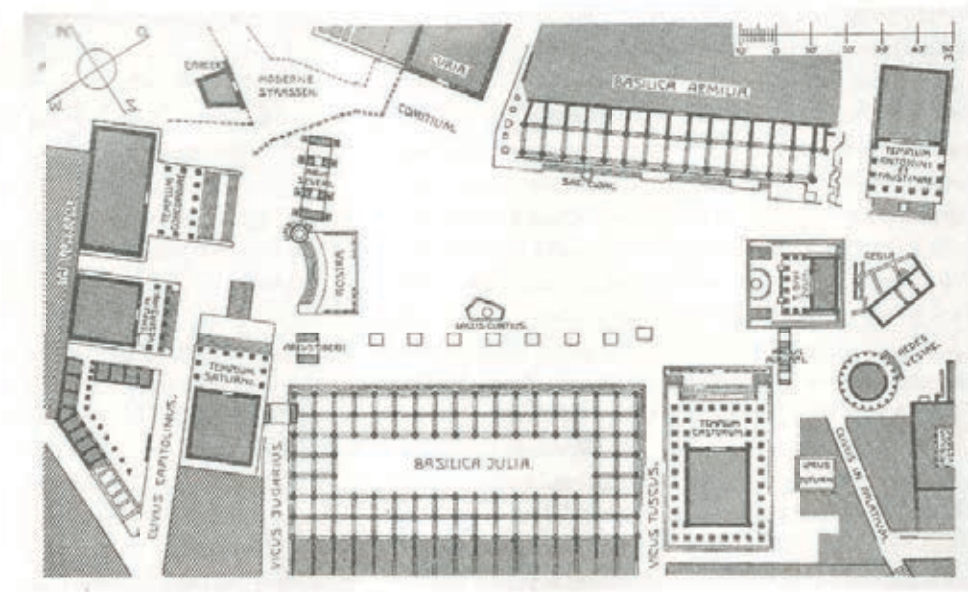
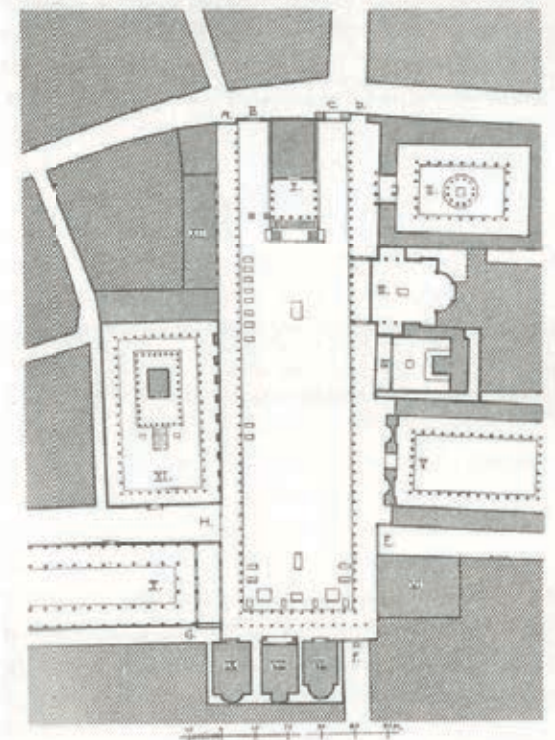
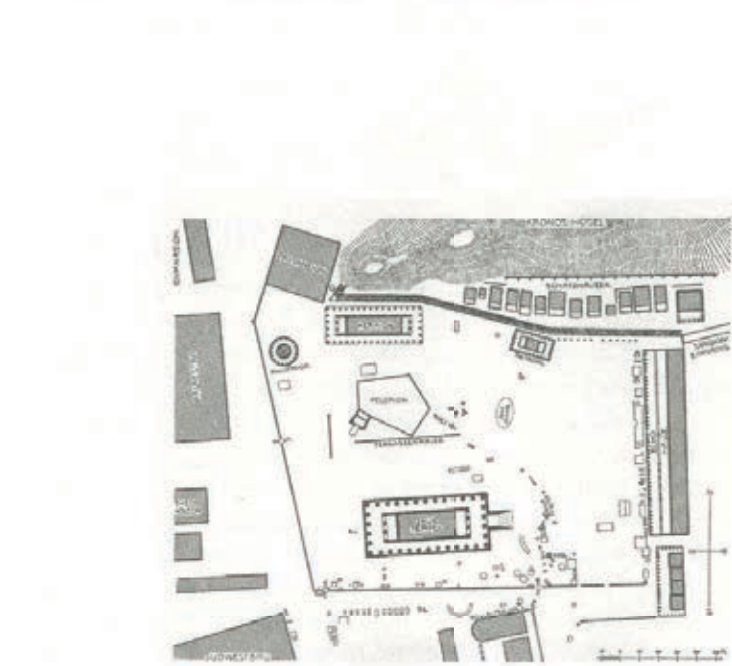
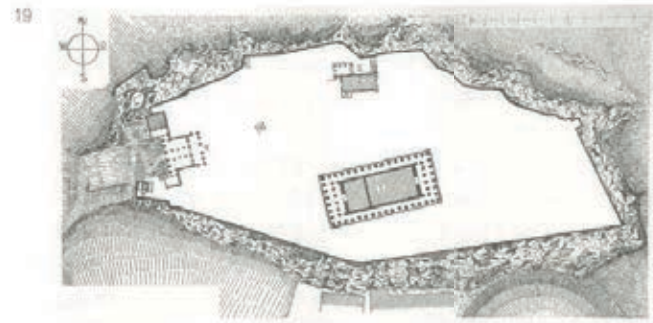


15 Analytical view of Villa Snellman, Djursholm, Sweden, by Erik Gunnar Asplund, showing the sequence of episodes from the entrance of the house to the upper oval hall and garden facade

17 Analytical view of Eileen Gray's Tempe à Paille showing transformable elements and fittings within the house overlaid on Gray's 'Solar Site Plan'

16 Diagram of Virginia Woolf's novel Jacob's Room showing how multiple, momentary points of view describe the life of Jacob Flanders

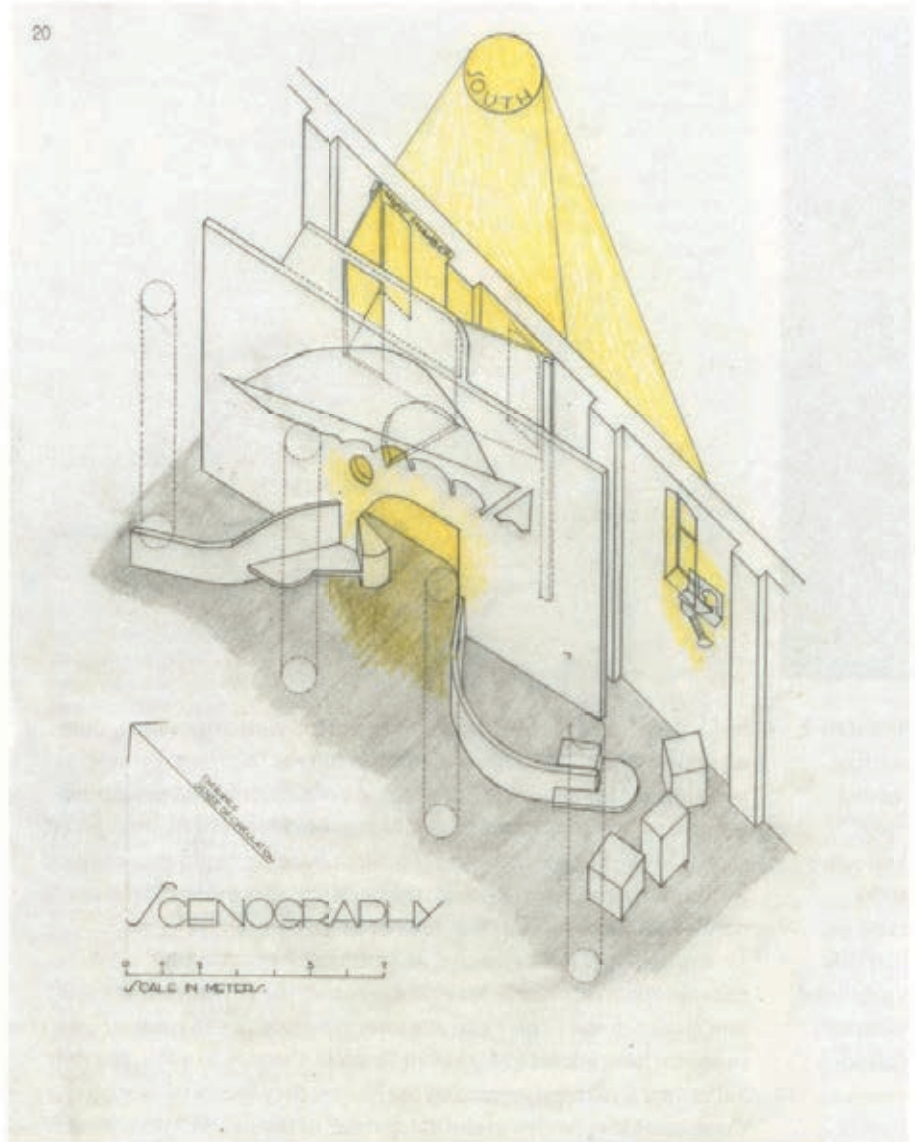
18 First floor plan of Münster City Library by Bolles Wilson.



19 The Forum Romanum, Forum at Pompeii and Acropolis collecting diverse elements together as depicted in Camillo Sitte's City Planning According to Artistic Principles

20 An episode from Sala Beckett by Flores & Prats. Axonometric drawing for the Liquid Light installation at the 2018 Biennale di Architettura at Le Corderie dell'Arsenale, Venice. Drawing by Eva Prats, 2018. Courtesy Flores & Prats.

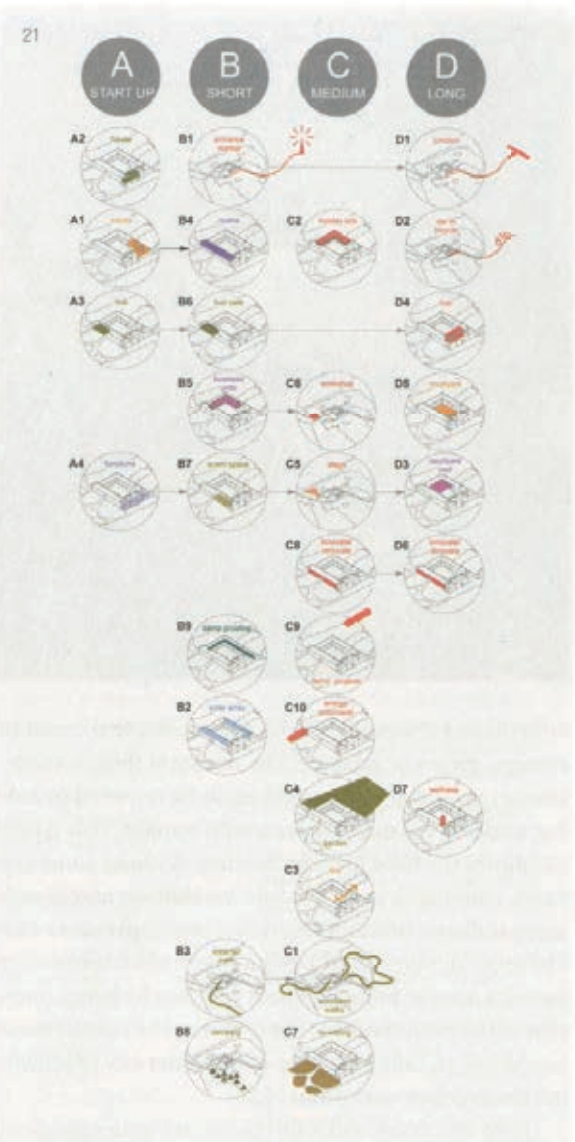
21 Diagram of start-up, short, medium and long term actions at Myross Wood House, Leap, Ireland, by Brady Mallalieu Architects.



Flores Y Prats approached the renovation of the Beckett Theatre in Barcelona their approach created a patchwork of interventions within the existing 'inherited' building, held together by a central space: [20]

Everything, space and students at the same time, revolves around that central void that has the scale of another time, of the moment that the building was a ruin. And in the end, it's like having the ruin there once again: a place in the open, on the boundary between interior and exterior, where you can see through spaces that connect lines and profiles of floors and walls that originally belonged to different places.²⁰

Their interventions are read against the background of what was there before; select opportunistic isolated moments contribute to a new whole which mixes the time of the present with the 'inherited time' in the building. Many others come to mind too in this light; the ambiguous temporality of Scarpa in Venice, Peter and Alison



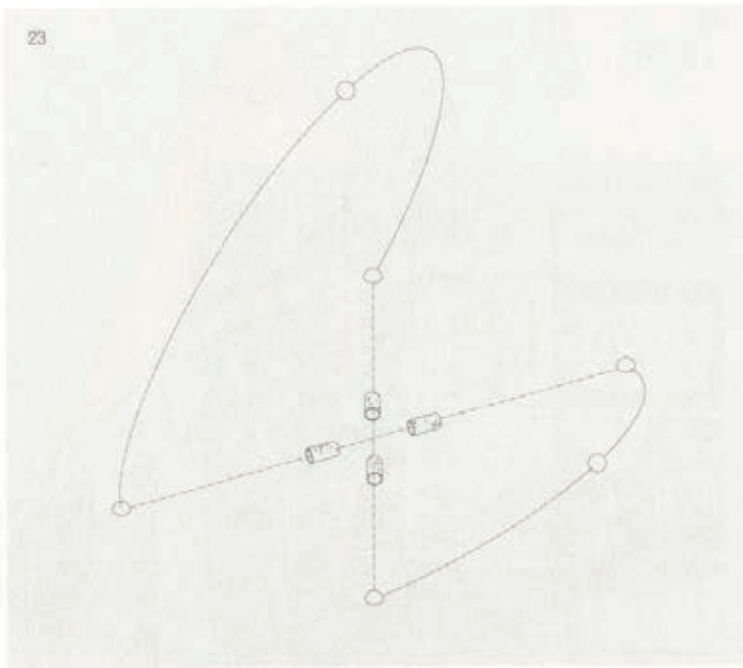
Smithson's ongoing work at Hexenhaus, Chipperfield at the Neues Museum in Berlin alongside many contemporary conversations about re-use and making the most of what is already there. As architects ourselves, rather than prescribe a defined form for a building in a recent project, we have developed instead a loose framework of actions for an existing building. This shoal of actions are envisaged to take place in the short, medium or long term, some might never happen and others might be added later, but collectively they begin to transform the building, not according to a fixed 'masterplan' but by evolving episodic intervention. It becomes impossible to state what the 'final' building will be like. [21]

As an approach this is not limited to work with existing buildings but influences newer works; as a collection of actions it implies that buildings, and environments generally, remain open compositions, capable of re-assembly and re-configuration. Piers Taylor, inspired by a local 'ad hoc and accumulated context'²¹ and not knowing if Invisible Studio's proposals for East Quay, in Watchet, would be built at once



or in phases it was 'conceived as a project that could be accumulated, change, grow and adapt.³⁰ The resultant form is made of multiple smaller episodes—one could easily be removed or another added but a critical collective mass would remain. This type of strategy combines the fixed and the fleeting. Without some critical collective mass, compositionally it would breakdown and dissolve into its surroundings. Within this critical mass episodes can come and go. The recently completed Design District in Greenwich relies on this too—its diverse buildings held together by being framed by a defined plot. If the boundaries of the plot dissolve, so too does the 'district', becoming an indistinct part of the wider city of individual episodes inhabiting their own plots.³¹ [22]

Both Smithson and Aalto chose to frame episodes in different ways, producing different temporalities. Hotel Palenque is an act of recall and suggestive of the experience of exploring a place in an ambiguous state amidst the processes of construction and ruin. Aalto takes these processes and frames them into an episodic, though atemporal form. The contrast has faint echoes of a wider debate Smithson was engaged within. In 1967 art historian Michael Fried published an essay entitled 'Art and Objecthood', which contrasted 'modernist' work, which at every moment is 'wholly manifest', existing in a continuous, perpetual present where 'presentness is grace', against the emerging challenge of minimal art which places an object in a situation such that it becomes 'a new genre of theater' by including the beholder.³² Smithson reacts to the essay with more temporal arguments, citing presentness as close to eternity—as a 'distortion of the belief in temporal histories, empires, revolutions...'—endorsing the diverse temporal approaches of 'ends, acceleration and perpetual presents' being explored by his contemporaries and attacked by Fried: Pol Bury working with slowness, Jean Tinguely creating kinetic suicidal machines, Andy Warhol's ever so long films and On Kawara's serial recording of time.³³ Smithson's response is



less a defence of his own work, or that of his contemporaries, than an appeal to consider time and temporality as inherent, diverse possibilities for an artwork. The nature of this time and possibility is perhaps less important than it being considered in the first place, than it being purposefully framed. Such framing could take many forms, perhaps linear, cyclical, measurable, continuous, thickened, regular, successive, simultaneous or unpredictable.

Present at Hotel Palenque, as Smithson was taking his photographs, was Nancy Holt. Recognising the rhythms of sunrise and sunset at the winter and summer solstices she aligns four concrete tubes to these events to form *Sun Tunnels*. Created in 1976, the year Aalto died and three years after Smithson, they locate us amongst these cosmic episodes in the 'deep time' of the desert.³⁴ As a work it has an irreducible conceptual purity—nothing could be added or removed, all being dependent upon their alignment with unchanging cycles. The episodic gatherings of Hotel Palenque and Aalto present a different approach—ambiguous and inconclusive. The part, here temporalised in the form of an episode, accumulates with others to form a whole in a momentary present. The relation of this present to the past and future is necessarily harder to establish. Smithson chooses to frame it in one way, Aalto another. [23]

22 East Quay, Watchet by Invisible Studio.

23 Sun Tunnels, Great Basin Desert, Utah, by Nancy Holt.

1. Robert Smithson, 'Cultural Confinement', in Harald Szeemann (ed), *Documenta 5 catalogue* (Kassel: C.Bertelsmann Verlag, 1972) and later in *Artforum*, October 1972, p.39.
2. Alvar Aalto, undated draft for a lecture from the mid 1920s published in Göran Schildt, *Alvar Aalto: The Early Years* (Helsinki: Otava, 1962) from Juhani Pallasmaa, 'Surface, Touch and Time' in Hand Sippo (ed), *Alvar Aalto, The Brick*, (Helsinki: Alvar Aalto Foundation, 2001), p.13.
3. Virginia Woolf, 'Modern Novels' in Andrew McNeillie (ed), *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Volume 3: 1919-24, (London: Hogarth Press, 1968), p.33.
4. Smithson, Robert, and Neville Wakefield, 'Insert Robert Smithson: Hotel Palenque 1969-1972', *Parkett*, Vol.43, 1985.
5. Ibid.
6. Jeremy Millar, 'Robert Smithson, "Hotel Palenque" (1969-72) (2020)', <<https://holtsmithsonfoundation.org/robert-smithson-hotel-palenque-1969-72>> [Accessed 1 March 2022]
7. The role of the 'window' in Smithson's work has been explored by Mark Linder in several papers including: Mark Linder, 'Slightly Windows: Robert Smithson's Architectural Criticism' in *Assemblage* 39, 6-35, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, (1999) p7-35 and Mark Linder 'Towards "A New Type of Building": Robert Smithson's Architectural Criticism', in *Robert Smithson*, (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004), p188-199.
8. Robert Smithson, 'Quasi Infinities and Waning of Space', *Arts Magazine* November 1966.
9. Robert Smithson, 'The Monuments of Passaic: Has Passaic replaced Rome as the eternal city?' (1967), in Jeffrey Kastner and Brian Wallis, *Land and Environmental Art* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1998), p229-230.
10. Robert Smithson, *Entropy and the New Monuments*, *Artforum*, (1968), pp26-31.
11. Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1977).
12. Juhani Pallasmaa, 'Surface, Touch and Time' in Hand Sippo (ed), *Alvar Aalto, The Brick*, (Helsinki: Alvar Aalto Foundation, 2001), p.26.
13. Demetri Porphyrios describes Aalto's work in 'Sources of Modern Eclecticism' using the term 'collage', which was later adopted by Pallasmaa and others, and 'heterotopia', in contrast to homotopia,

where different elements are placed without a 'locus common to them all'. The study also speculated on the 'sources' of each element, collage becoming the compositional technique for each to co-exist within a new entity. Rather than collage, which takes part of something from one place and places it in another, out of place, this paper concerns itself with a different compositional approach in which episodes, self contained in their own right, co-exist. Demetri Porphyrios, *Sources of Modern Eclecticism* (London: Academy Editions, 1982). The uses of the 'heterotopia' in architectural theory is helpfully summarised by Henry Urbach who criticises Porphyrios' limited use of the term which ultimately led to 'a belief in codified recurrence of forms': Henry Urbach (1998) 'Writing architectural heterotopia', *The Journal of Architecture*, 3:4, 347-354.

14. The 'becoming' of the house and its imagery is discussed in Sarah Menin and Flora Samuel, *Nature and Space: Aalto and Le Corbusier*, (London: Routledge, 2003), pp95-102.
15. Alvar Aalto quoted in Richard Weston, *Alvar Aalto* (London: Phaidon, 1995), p.83.
16. Kim Hyon-Sob describes Aalto's work as a 'reconciliation of polarities' of modern and primitive, Western and Eastern, geometric and organic, and, masculine and feminine; Kim Hyon-Sob, *Alvar Aalto and His Experimentation in Villa Mairea*, Unpublished PhD thesis (School of Architecture: The University of Sheffield, April 2005).
17. See Antony Radford and Tarikko Oksala 'Alvar Aalto and the expression of discontinuity' in *The Journal of Architecture*, 12:3, (2007), p257-280.
18. Richard Weston, *Alvar Aalto* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1995), p.190.
19. The University of Jyväskylä building complex on Seminaarinmäki was protected by law in 1992. The interiors of some of the buildings have already been 'lost'. <<https://www.alvaraalto.fi/en/architecture/university-of-jyvaskyla/>> [Accessed 1 March 2022]
20. Rutherford Chang has exhibited the albums in galleries internationally. His wider work explores aspects of contemporary culture, absences and ordering systems.
21. Howard Robertson, *The Principles of Architectural Composition*, (London: The Architectural Press, 1924), p5.
22. David Leatherbarrow, 'God is in the Detail: On Evidence and Imagination', *A World of Architectural History*,

Bartlett School of Architecture, May 21, 2021, <<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/architecture/news/2021/may/explore-new-video-archive-world-architectural-history-conference>> [Accessed 1 March 2022] and David Leatherbarrow 'Whole Parts: urban architecture, in and out of scale' from *The Living Memory of Cities*, an online seminar series convened in collaboration with Eric Parry Architects and the Centre for Urban and Built Ecologies (CUBE), London Metropolitan University. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sxNhrichia0>> [Accessed 1 March 2022]. An earlier reflection on the 'reflexivity' of part and whole is contained in: David Leatherbarrow, 'Architecture, the City, and Nature: Part and Whole?' In *Oz*: Vol. 24, 2002, p14-19.

23. Dalibor Vesely's discussion of the fragment notes approaches to wholeness and that the 'fragment always has a situational structure' resonant with many of the themes discussed here, though ultimately is something different to the episode. See 'The Rehabilitation of Fragment' in Dalibor Vesely, *Architecture in the age of divided representation: the question of creativity in the shadow of production*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004), pp317-364.
24. Woolf's momentary architecture and use of architectural analogy is explored further in a forthcoming paper by the author entitled 'Cathedrals on the Light of a Butterfly's Wing: The momentary architecture of Virginia Woolf', pending publication with *arg* (Architectural Research Quarterly).
25. Peter Wilson and Jonathan Hagos, 'Jonathan Hagos > Münster City Library (Bolles+Wilson, 1993)', AF Turns 30 series online talk, (2021) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qe7XQ4l9x_c&t=2s> [Accessed 1 March 2022]
26. George P. Collins in Camillo Sitte, *City Planning According to Artistic Principles*, Trans George R. Collins (New York: Random House, 1965) p.xii.
27. Sarah Menin, 'Fragments from the forest: Aalto's requisitioning of forest place and matter' in *The Journal of Architecture*, 6:3, (2001) p.279-306.
28. Ricardo Flores and Eva Prats, 'The discipline of the existing, after Sala Beckett' in Flores and Prats, *Sala Beckett—International Drama Centre*, (Barcelona: Arquina, 2020) p.194.
29. Piers Taylor, in an Invisible Studio Instagram post of 25 February 2022, stated: 'Context @eastquaywatchet—I'd always loved the ordinary, ad hoc

and accumulated and particularly at Watchet where the small scale and the accrued informality gave us so much to work with' <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZL83_ysPFs/> [Accessed 25 February 2022]

30. Invisible Studio, Instagram post on 26 January 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZL83_ysPFs/> [Accessed 27 January 2022]
31. Alpa Depani, 'Can you really design a design district?', in *Architects Journal* (24 January 2022) <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/opinion/can-you-really-design-a-design-district?utm_medium=Social&utm_source=Twitter#Echobox=1643021851> [Accessed 26 January 2022]
32. Mark Linder has attempted to 'refine architecture, particularly minimal architecture, through the 'literal' sense evoked by Fried's essay. More relevant to this discussion are Linder's papers on Smithson's 'windows' noted above.
33. Pamela M Lee describes these approaches of 'Ends, acceleration and perpetual presents' in: Pamela M Lee, *Chronophobia*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2006)
34. Nancy Holt described the time of the desert where *Sun Tunnels* is situated thus: "'Time' is not just a mental concept or a mathematical abstraction in the desert. The rocks in the distance are ageless; they have been deposited in layers over hundreds of thousands of years; 'Time' takes on a physical presence. Only ten miles south of Sun Tunnels are the Bonneville Salt Flats, one of the few areas in the world where you can actually see the curvature of the earth. Being part of that kind of landscape, and walking on earth that has surely never been walked on before, evokes a sense of being on this planet, rotating in space, in universal time.' Nancy Holt, 'Sun Tunnels' in *Artforum*, Vol.15, No.8 (April 1977), p.34-35



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