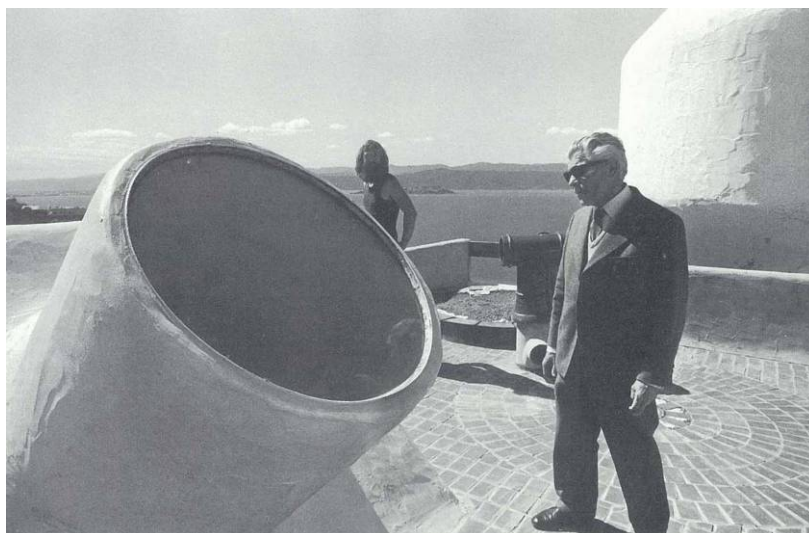


# Silent Voices

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## **Abstract**

*This paper reflects on overlaps, gaps and conflicts that may occur between written, visual and built discourses in architecture. It explores co-incidences and differences in the critical intentions evident within different modes of architectural representation. A rereading of the built architecture and discourse around Futuna Chapel compared with historic and contemporary representations and writing on the chapel particularly the book 'Voices of Silence' by Russell Walden form a case study through which to explore architectures ability to carry idea through building. Comparison of disjunctions, coincidences and overlaps between different modes of architectural representation are utilised as method to test, critique and develop existing discourses in architecture. Shifts between written, visual and built media bring into focus critical intentions, where ideas have emerged and developed, and gaps where ideas have withered or been lost in translation. Reflecting upon implications of built architecture considered as the outcome of critical spatial practice an argument is promoted for the consideration of built work as having an independent critical presence equivalent in value to that of a published text.*



**Figure 1** Ernst Plischke and Ian Athfield at Athfield House 1975  
(Athfield Architects Archive)

## Silent Voices

In this photograph published in David Mitchell's "The Elegant Shed" Ernst Plischke is caught contemplating a porthole on the roofscape of the Athfield house. The photograph is important here for its content rather than its historicity. It indicates the potential ability of architecture to challenge, to question, to propose, to elaborate directly through building. That Athfield's Architecture would pose many questions for Plischke will be apparent to anyone familiar with the Architecture of both men from the same period of time,<sup>1</sup> as Mitchell notes in the photograph caption "Plischke could never have contemplated this building: his work was precise, considered and refined by comparison".<sup>2</sup> This paper investigates architecture as building that actively operates on its contexts, and that may be open to contemplation and interpretation in the manner of a photograph, a drawing or a written text. Working from built architecture to text as method the ability of architecture to carry idea is explored.

Gaps between academic and professional praxis in architecture have been increasingly evident in recent years primarily due to the effect of changes in research demands that have arisen from performance based research funding requirements in Universities. From late 2001 the UK Governments research quality assurance and recognition exercise (RAE), and its Australian and New Zealand equivalents the Excellence in Research for Australia programme (ERA), and the Performance based Research Funding programme (PBRF) have focused academic attention on the measurement of the quality of research outputs<sup>3</sup>. Academics have needed to prioritise research over design of architecture in the interests of furthering their academic careers, which are increasingly dependant on the extent and status of their research publications.

There is also increased contemporary scholarship in Design Research, Design as Research, Research through Design, and Research by Design.<sup>4</sup> The recent proliferation of Masters by design project degrees in Architecture also suggests that there is also a parallel resurgence of interest in what is described in this paper as research through the medium of design; research that occurs primarily through visual design mediums and has visual outcomes. "Design is a way of inquiring, a way of producing knowing and knowledge; This means it is a way of researching."<sup>5</sup>

Research through the medium of design investigates ideas through the production of a work. A recent paper presented to the 2008 Unitec Design Research Symposium<sup>6</sup> argued that research through the medium of design in New Zealand employs design as a research method like a series of scientific experiments and trials. It is the recorded documentation,

critical reflection, commentary, or public presentation of the design considered with the design that constitute the research output. The design as visual output, or the built architecture as design outcome are not considered a research output unless accompanied by secondary commentary that interpret their significance.

An issue of interpretation and assessment of quality emerges when built architecture is considered as research outcome, or a basis for research work. Built architecture may be interpreted in a manner analogous to a written work. It can be reflected on and critical interpretations made about it by people with visual design expertise as occurs for the assessment of student projects in academic institutions, or with professional critiques of built architecture.

“Meaning is not something added to architecture; it is a much larger, and slipperier thing. It is not located *in* the architecture: it is what happens to and around architecture as part of a complex social exchange. It happens in the interval, as a result of an encounter between architecture and its public, in the field”.<sup>7</sup>

Written texts are more directly and easily understood and interpreted through codified written language and systems of interpretation than is possible for built work. In a written academic work the related references are explicitly stated and a bibliography formalises a wider context for the discussion. Drawn architectural representational systems of projection and notation exist and assist interpretation of visual work, but built objects have no common formalised codified means of detail interpretation equivalent to written language. Built and visual outcomes of research through the media of design are quality assured through written journal articles and conference papers, reviews, exhibitions, awards and prizes. New Zealand PBRF assured research outcomes currently privilege written and process based design work over the built as primary research outputs. Yet built architecture has an active operative effect on its contexts that can be critically assessed as primary research output. Architecture as built object has an authority and a stability that is rooted in its physical presence. Building considered as a primary source of architectural research will be examined in the next section of this paper to question the primacy of the text in contemporary New Zealand architectural research.

Direct experience of the Futuna Chapel as architectural object will be transposed with readings of Walden’s text ‘Voices of Silence’ as a means to tease out the discussion of built architectures ability to operate as evidence of architectural thinking. The chapel is selected as a case study because its built qualities may be compared with the extensive published visual and written discourse constructed around the chapel, particularly the book ‘*Voices of*

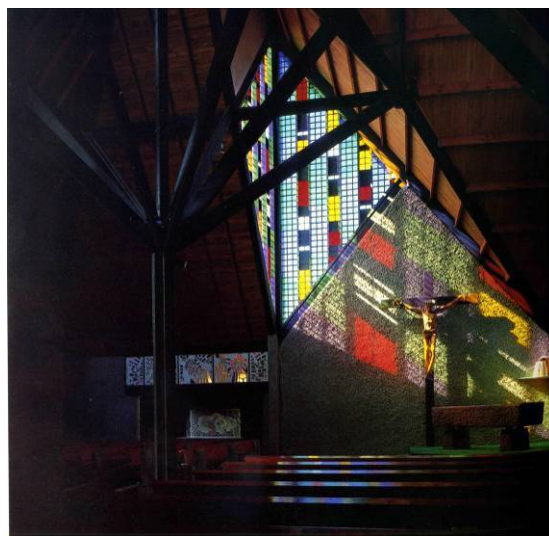
*Silence* by Russell Walden<sup>8</sup>. The case study begins with description of the built chapel, followed by description of the book *Voices of Silence* before exploring three detailed aspects of the chapels built architecture as a means to reflect on, critique and update key aspects of the books discussion, and to explore the ability of architecture as building to carry idea.

Visiting Futuna requires a trip to the suburb of Karori, a place apart. The chapel now sits uncomfortably, swallowed in the sprawl set back from an unremarkable street crowded by a developers mean medium density cookie cutter housing estate. The Chapel has its side vertical split gable and hip facing the street. A deep concrete cross cast into the face of the gable announces its purpose. Entry is not initially apparent. You approach it as a sculptural object, with intrigue, questions, curiosity. As you get closer its texture and material qualities are apparent. You pass near its walls its rough cast plaster, and low roof with crafted copper clad brackets and extending cantilevered gutter detail. The valley from the steep hip extends down low discharging the rain into a watergarden pool. As you move around the hip roof there is a layering of the wall and materials, blockwork and plaster. You slip around the side and under a soaring entry canopy, that comes low, split in two. Up high there is coloured light introduced through windows within the exterior wall into the outside entry space, and a crafted timber brise soleil over the entry. Lower down is entry, two separated modest entry doors at right angles to each other set back within deep recesses. Which door do we choose to enter by? is the question asked by the architecture.

There is a large pole adjacent to the entry, freestanding within the space and branching out tree like to support a timbered roof structure. A further step inside the entry and your eyes are immediately drawn to the focus, a raised granite altar in the corner under a soaring timber clad valley roof. Beams of light from four high coloured windows activate the focal space. The Chapel is L shaped, with entry between the two right angle wings and again confronts you with a choice. Which of the two chapel wings will I enter? Left or Right? The two wings are spatially separated and contain seating banks raised up one step on plinths above a greenstone crazy paved floor. The seats are carefully detailed timber lengths supported on precast concrete verticals that protrude into the seating space. The spaces of the wings are enclosed by timber hip roofs, but are also extended and layered with niches off the ends and sides. Dark stained timber work and white plaster relief artworks are located up high in the rear and one side of the wings, and mosaic tile relief artworks and marble plinths form side Altars to the chapel.

Walden begins his book on Futuna with a quote from Samuel Butlers *Erewhon* revisited, "To historians is granted a talent that even the Gods are denied – to alter what has already

happened”. This reflection on the book’s own historicity foreshadows the historic and critical value of the book, and indicates his awareness of the book’s role canonising Scott and his Architecture in a specifically international context. The text is a declaration of faith, spiritual and architectural. It varies in style, at times descriptive and documentary, at times poetic containing as much mysterious interpretation as the architecture it describes. The book comprehensively brings together historic archival and qualitative research. There are several themes presented; Futuna’s theological and spiritual basis and effects; the mystery the chapel creates and its phenomenological effects on users; the chapel’s design development, Scott’s influences and Maori heritage; and the chapel’s significance as original, regional, Pacific, indigenous, New Zealand Architecture.

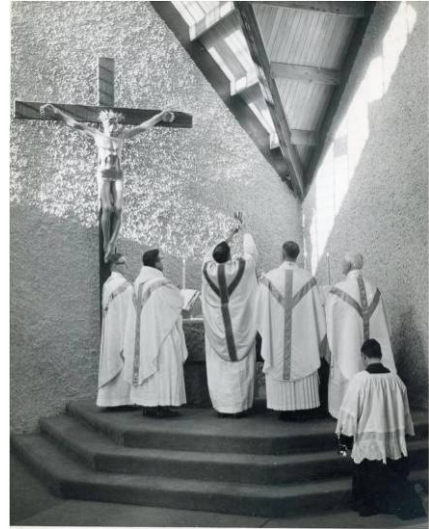


**Figure 2.** Futuna in full summer light. (Gavin Woodward, *Voices of silence* p18).

Walden’s initial argument is for Futuna as a place of individual reflection and inner silence, as a place that could have the potential to speak to people and move them through its use of light, “the use of light from without to illuminate a quest for the experience of God within”.<sup>9</sup> This argument is supported by the experience of the building interior over time particularly when the sun is shining. Beams of coloured light penetrate deep into the space and move slowly through the interior as the sun moves. The mixture of light and dark in the chapel create qualities of cast light through dim space evident in a gothic cathedral. This is also apparent in Gavin Woodward’s photographs in ‘Voices of Silence’ showing the Perspex windows throwing beams of coloured light within the interior. The form and rising of the seats within the chapel on plinths also reinforces the interpretation of the chapel as a place of separation from the surrounding world and internal reflection. Futuna is clearly designed around its function as a retreat chapel.

Experience of the Futuna Chapel is not that of a community chapel like Scott's earlier St Johns Chapel Hastings, an octagonal building with the nave occupying most of the space. Scott's major design move for Futuna splits the nave physically and spatially into two wings in an 'L' shape. These spaces are clearly separated by the entrance, central pole, and the roof structure and forms. The two sides of the chapel operate even more separately than a traditional parallel church where at least the two wings are linked by an aisle. In Futuna the wings operate in the manner of transepts in a traditional cruciform church design. The two wings at the Futuna Chapel are entered through separate adjacent doors and much of the congregation is spatially separated without vision of the other wing of the congregation because of orientation and the depth of each wing. Futuna's liturgical effects and theological basis were also discussed by Walden "Futuna celebrates the idea of a developing community gathered around the altar".<sup>10</sup> "Scott anticipated the reforms of the second Vatican council by nearly a decade".<sup>11</sup> He argues that Scott anticipated the sweeping Catholic liturgical changes of the 1959 - 1965 second Vatican council in the design of the two L shaped wings and sees relationship between the two parts of the congregation in these. This separation of the congregation into two parts is distinctive and as discussed above may be more appropriately considered to have contributed to the creation of the individual experience of mystery poetically described by Walden as "knowing the chapel of Futuna", and "Elected silence"<sup>12</sup> than to a community worship liturgical experience promoted for Catholic church design after 1965. Discussion of the religious context for the chapel design clarifies Scott's intentions for the chapel design.

The Marist Religious Order was already a patron of John Scott at the time the chapel was commissioned<sup>13</sup>. Scott was raised as a Catholic and regarded this upbringing as being as "fundamental as going to the lavatory"<sup>14</sup>. At the time the chapel was conceived and constructed, and at the Futuna Retreat Centre the ritual of the Catholic mass was conducted in Latin with the priests facing away from the congregation. The Altar at Futuna was originally positioned further from the congregation than it is today closer to the corner most distant from the entry doors. Clearly the chapel was designed specifically for these rituals and the associated retreat function. During retreats the side Altars would accommodate a series of priests each completing their own solitary ritual mass within the same space as was required during this period of time. After 1965 Priests were able to 'concelebrate' a single mass together and so the Side Altars became defunct.



**Figure 3.** Scott attending mass in Futuna Chapel. (Marist Archives).  
**Figure 4.** Priest celebrating Latin mass at Futuna facing away from the congregation. (Marist Archives).

Some time after 1965 the main granite Altar was moved forward allowing the Priest to face the congregation for the rituals of the Mass. This aspect of the change worked well enough functionally, however other changes to the liturgy reviving the role of scripture gave more problems. Liturgically the Altar was to have less prominence, and be of equal importance to the lectern and the presider's chair. This was not practical at Futuna with the extent of steps and limited area around the Altar. This also restricted the possibility of groups of priests concelebrating Mass. Walden is rightly critical of the design of the lectern and presider's chair which were removed for the photos of the Chapel included in *Voices of Silence*. Aesthetically and spatially they clutter, however they remain a critical part of the celebration of the rituals that needed to be accommodated.<sup>15</sup> The Futuna Chapel as built is evidence that it was not designed to be a place of community liturgy. It was designed to be a place of individual contemplation and worship, and a place to celebrate the rituals of the time. Ironically it was the lack of suitability for community worship that was a key reason for the chapel becoming redundant. In the later years of its operation as a retreat centre the chapel was rarely used for the rituals of Mass and Confession which occurred within the common spaces of the adjacent original homestead considered more appropriate for these purposes. The chapel continued to be used for individual reflection until the retreat function at Futuna ceased.

The international standing and standard of the chapel is another important thread of Futuna Chapels historicity. The influence of Le Corbusier on the chapel design is discussed briefly by Walden who notes "that it is no surprise to learn that, to an extent, Le Corbusier's Chapel at Ronchamp pointed the way"<sup>16</sup> when discussing the design of the light modulators, and

suggests that Le Corbusier's influence was also manifest through similarity of the way the two architects "manipulated light, texture, colour, rough concrete"<sup>17</sup> While Mitchell considers the two buildings to be very different<sup>18</sup> Derek Wilson discusses the Le Corbusier influence in 1988 "Scott was influenced by Le Corbusier, it was impossible to be otherwise. His ringing phrases were trumpets and cymbals to our ears" He also quotes Jim Allen as noting that "Ronchamp was alive in Johns mind".<sup>19</sup> There is evidence within the interior architecture of the Chapel of a direct link between the design of the Ronchamp Chapel and the Futuna Chapel<sup>20</sup> Examination of the design of the seats and how retreat function of the chapel is reinforced by them lead to the recognition of the uncanny similarity between the design of the Futuna Chapel and Ronchamp seats and plinth. The earthy greenstone paving stone floor, the raised seating plinths floating above the rest of the floor plane, and the detail of the design of the precast concrete and timber seats show the seating at Ronchamp to have been a direct and formative precedent for Scott.



**Figure 5.** Ronchamp Chapel floor, plinth and seats. (*Russell Walden* 1965. **Figure 6.** Futuna Chapel floor, plinth and seats. (Gavin Woodward *Voices of Silence* p142).

The design of these elements is evidence of "cribbing".<sup>21</sup> The similarity is clearly evident from a comparison of the two seats derived initially from a study of the architecture, which speaks with the authority of a primary reference in an academic work.

To acknowledge the direct influence of Le Corbusier on Scott in the design of the Futuna Chapel is to bring into clearer focus the mixture of influences that occurred in the design of the Chapel and weakens the argument for the emergence of an indigenous New Zealand architecture in the Futuna Chapel.<sup>22</sup> Scott had not visited Le Corbusier's Ronchamp yet it was a formative influence that he interpreted and translated through his particularly New Zealand filter which drew also on his more direct New Zealand Architectural experiences and as Bill Mckay has argued, on his mixed European and Maori heritage.<sup>23</sup> The critical historicity of Futuna Chapel proposed by Russell Walden in the introduction to *Voices of*



Silence is therefore updated by a rereading of the Chapel Architecture as building containing evidence of Scott's architectural influences.

### **Between building and text**

Reflecting on the means of investigation from built architecture to text in order to explore implications of the interpretation of built architecture as primary research material particular readings and interpretations of the built architecture have been found to be supported by written discourse. For example the Walden's poetic assessment of Futuna Chapel as a place of contemplation and individual spiritual retreat. Reconsideration of the chapels liturgical potentials as indicated by the building provide different results. They show an alternative reading and line of discussion to that initiated by Walden, clarifying and revising this to reflect the Chapels conventional liturgical design and operation, and problems this generated as needs changed over time. The reading of the directness of the chapel architecture seating design influence highlights the need for clarification and development of previous discussions around Le Corbusier's influence on the Futuna Chapel design. The spaces and overlaps that have emerged between built, visual, and written discourses in architecture provide room for reinforcement, indifference, misalignment, incongruence and questions to arise. Like primary texts used as academic sources for research, architecture as building has in this case been a foundational reference that has enabled a revision of discourse around the chapel.

At this point in the discussion the operation of translation between modes of representation is apparent. "Written and visual modes of praxis have particular tendencies. When work moves between modes of praxis some things are gained and others are lost".<sup>24</sup> There are particular characteristics inherent to different modes of representations and connections and disconnections that occur when movement between them occurs. Architecture as building has been shown to carry evidence of architectural thinking and intent. Potentially it could articulate and demonstrate a constructed rigor we associate with architectural research outcomes. Any intellectual context within a built work is however latent unless it's associated secondary representations are published, so there is interdependence between the built and written. The built may lead or support writing.<sup>25</sup> Recognising built architecture as a primary research material implies a critical mode of academic praxis that relies less on constructions based on secondary modes of representation and returns more to building as primary research source.

A significant extent of architectural production exists that is not documented, assessed, recognised, historicised, contextualised or disseminated. This is primary source material for discourse and teaching in the manner of a visual archive and is a complimentary resource to written libraries. Greater use of this built architecture as critical material infers the maturing of critical visual culture in architecture. This would occur through increased focused education in architectural criticism.

Built architectures ability to operate on its contexts and to maintain evidence of this within its object indicates the possibility of intellectual scholarship through architectural objects, the possibility of building as discursive architectural output, and the possibility of building as research output mediated through critical spatial practice.

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<sup>1</sup> For an example of Plischke's work from the period see the Frey House, Graz August Sarnitz and Eva B Ottillinger *Ernst Plischke: Modern Architecture for the New World* p219

<sup>2</sup> David Mitchell and Gillian Chaplin *The Elegant Shed: New Zealand Architecture since 1945* Oxford University Press 1984 p 66

<sup>3</sup> This is reflected in a wealth of discourse in Journals such as ARQ and JAE on research and design as research subject matter.

<sup>4</sup> Selected key texts in this area include Allpress, Brent (Ed). *Architectural Design Research. Project-based design research and Discourse on Design*. AASA 2005 and 2007. Groat, Linda and Wang, David. *Architectural Research Methods*. John Wiley & Sons 2002. Downton Peter. *Design Research*. RMIT University Press Melbourne, 2004. Laaksonen E, Simons T, Vartola A (Eds). *Research and Practice in Architecture*. Alvar Aalto Academy 2001. Stan Allen *Practice: Architecture, Technique + Representation* Routledge 2009. Leon van Schaik *Mastering Architecture* Wiley-Academy England, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Downton *Design Research* RMIT Press 2004 p2

<sup>6</sup> Mark Southcombe. Guest Symposium presentation *Mind the Gap: Research through the medium of design* Unitec design in architecture and landscape architecture: process and teaching symposium, Point Chevalier, Auckland, 15 August 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Stan Allen *Practice: Architecture Technique +Representation* Routledge 2009 pxiv

<sup>8</sup> Futuna Chapels significance for New Zealand Architecture cannot be under stated. It is regarded as the key work of John Scott, New Zealand's first Maori Architect to achieve national recognition for the quality of his work. The project received an NZIA Gold medal in 1968 and a NZIA 25 year Award in 1986 and was the subject of a major book *Voices of Silence* by Russell Walden in 1987. The book was awarded a NZIA National Award for Architecture in 1993 and remains the only book ever to achieve this milestone. There is extensive architectural writing and material around the chapel and its historicity including the Pacific Symposium held at the chapel in 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Russell Walden *Voices of Silence* VUW Press 1987 p32

<sup>10</sup> Russell Walden *Voices of Silence* p134

<sup>11</sup> Russell Walden *Voices of Silence* p64. This argument was also taken up by Peter Shaw in *NZ Architecture from Polynesian beginnings to 1990* Everbest Hong Kong 1991 p177.

<sup>12</sup> Russell Walden *Voices of Silence* Ch1 & Ch2

<sup>13</sup> Scott already had a working relationship with his client the Marist Religious Order having designing the Hastings St Johns College and its chapel – a major reconstruction project for his old school prior to the Futuna commission. Scott also designed the L shaped dormitory wing on Friend Street constructed immediately before the chapel, the site development plan for Futuna, and several alterations to the existing buildings on site. Scott maintained a long relationship with the client group. The Futuna Retreat Centre became Scott's Wellington home base where he stayed during the chapel's construction and for many years after. In 1989 I travelled to Wellington to visit the Chapel and was given accommodation by the brothers in the Architects room, a room that was reserved primarily for John Scott when he was in Wellington.

<sup>14</sup> Russell Walden *Voices of Silence* p50

<sup>15</sup> National Conference of Catholic Bishops *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship* 1978 ch1

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<sup>16</sup> Russell Walden *Voices of Silence* p124

<sup>17</sup> Russell Walden *Voices of Silence* p155

<sup>18</sup> David Mitchell and Gillian Chaplin *The Elegant Shed: New Zealand Architecture since 1945* p 65

<sup>19</sup> ANZ March/April 1988 p75-77

<sup>20</sup> To my knowledge this material has not been previously been documented. It was presented in an earlier version at the Pacific symposium in 4 October 2008. Mark Southcombe *Retreat at Futuna*. Since the symposium presentation it has become apparent the connection between the design of the seats at Futuna and Ronchamp has also been observed by others.

<sup>21</sup> Ironically Walden notes that Scott “felt alienated by a profession that which ripped its integrity apart by wholesale cribbing from foreign magazines”. Russell Walden *Voices of Silence* pg53

<sup>22</sup> Russell Walden proposes “It is a New Zealand building, in a New Zealand Landscape, by a New Zealand architect. Futuna’s triumph is not a culmination, but speaks poignantly about what a Pacific architecture might, could, and should be.” Russell Walden *Voices of Silence* p157

<sup>23</sup> Bill McKay *Halfcaste or bicultural: John Scott, Maori and architecture in the 1960s* Contested Terrains, SAHANZ proceedings 2006 p363- 369.

<sup>24</sup> Robin Evans *Translations from Drawing to Building: Translations from Drawing to Building and other essays* London AA Documents 2 1997.

<sup>25</sup> Jonathan Hill *Drawing forth a immaterial architecture* ARQ vol10 no1 2006 p51