Five Small Practices

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I wonder how much work architecture should do. Or, asked more proactively, how much work could architecture do?

A variegated density in spatial make-up, in design, might be part of this conversation. Here I offer five factors in the design process that might facilitate relational simultaneity, a complexity of sorts, comprised of multiple agents that interact—temporally productive representational and spatial entanglements—pointing to another scope for architecture. My five working points are: (1) the naming problem; (2) the speculative capacity of language prompts; (3) analogous thinking; (4) tailoring visualizations; and (5) supporting heterogeneous ideas in a body of work. Augmented by other design examples, my work, the David's Island Strategic Plot will serve as a kind of mannequin, a framework, to discuss productive spatial entanglements, suggesting the potential for varied relational assemblies that might co-exist in architecture.

Related to the questions of complexity addressed in this issue of *Oz,* might architecture have embedded and varied lives, emerging, withdrawing, and waiting over and through time, offering multiple ways into a project, sustaining alternative cultural durability?

Devil's Advocate

The history of culture is replete with the residue of articulating our cultur-al imagination, a yearning to put into some form the complex profundity of human experience. Vitruvius spoke of commodity, firmness, and delight as necessary for good design. In 1570, Palladio issued his *Four Books on Architecture,* which advanced a grammar of architecture, from building materials and residences to Roman temples, providing rules and plans for creative and unique buildings. In 1923, Le Corbusier articulated his now infamous "Five Points of Architecture," which advocated for modern architecture as he anticipated a new society. Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction* of 1966, the gentle manifesto, posited ways in which we might reconsider the history of architecture through articulating form. And in the mid-1990s, architect and educator Kevin Rhowbotham suggested that form is the primary vehicle for political intervention and cultural critique.

Recently, many approaches to design, to producing form emanate from problem-solving attitudes, from the significant weight of the metrical program (a default and uncritical ghost of functionalism) to digital form-finding techniques and fashionable trends. Articulated through myriad vocabularies of late Modernism, high-tech, deconstruction, folding, field thinking, and more recently topology, affect, technique, contemporary processes, and the post-critical (I have no doubt missed some), these developments have structured discourses in architecture, particularly in architectural education. To play devil's advocate for a moment, although many contributions have been made, these histories might be too exclusive, relying on singular approaches, frequently producing autonomous and non-participatory architecture, lacking a kind of cultural complexity, a relevant density, and appropriate scope. To augment these histories, these thoughts seek to spark small practices, of which there are many, for conversations toward variegated spatial density and as a result to alternative cultural potential.

Five points

(1) The naming problem

Dependable, naming in an architectural context relies on conventions, establishing categorical fixation, and hardwiring default relations about what matters and what doesn't. Imagine being asked to design the foyer for a speculative office building or a bedroom. By naming, the task of design is frequently established and default assumptions rooted, relegating design to what is already known. To be honest these design projects are already 75% complete before the process of design actually begins. Alternatively, structuring relations rather than naming the architectural program, for example, may open a robust, indeed a more complex relational field, for creative interface and embodied practices. In the process of designing a bedroom, you might use different terminologies: represen-tational and spatial opportunities motivated by nocturnal and diurnal cycles; reflection on the privatization of sexuality; anticipating the dream states of occupants; the spatial ramifications of being sick. Such conceptions consider another range of relationships rather than reducing spatial decisions to convenient material choices and functional adjacencies—the side tables here, the bed against the wall, and the bathroom just out of reach— all dictated by the default assumptions inherited through program naming.

Said differently, the need in science for simple, easily-recognized conventions has produced useful nomenclature systems. For architects, however, this leaves opportunities for more complex and perhaps more effective spatial relations on the doorstep of familiar translations rather than in a more desirable position of active interpretation. This amplifies the differences between the appearance of naming and the deeper capacity of active relationships structured by diverse ideas in a project. Evoking Lawrence Weschler, seeing might require forgetting the name of the thing one sees.

In the *David's Island* design proposal (Figure 1), naming moved from the conventions of predicting functional adjacencies to a process of renaming, occasioning alternative functions for the island. Imagine: an inaccessible divide or an axis of mutiny; landings for mythical travelers; camouflage surfaces; an arrival vessel; labyrinths

Figure 1. David's Island: *Strategic Plot. Moving among the potentials of notation, indexes, and figurative marks, this drawing type activates relationships of position, movement, duration, and figuration over and through time.*

of emptiness or air turbulence fields; moving and miscoordinated landscapes; a machinic surveillance field; erosion surfaces and polished metamorphic rock gardens; a ballasted space; an attractive shell surface; easement fencing; a multiplied officer's headquarters; bird colony lines; photo ops; panoramic steel walls; and "no fly zones."

As demonstrated in the drawing, recognizing the limitations of naming in architecture might liberate designers, prying open default assumptions about functional adjacencies, and increasing the potential

of programmatic thinking and of the agency of architectural representation toward an enriched cultural imagination.

(2) Language prompts

In some cases, using language imaginatively in the design process can be productive, leveraging the simultaneous precision and suggestive play of language, grounding communication while opening interpretative design contours. In some of my work, language prompts can augment, in fact open, conceptual, formal, and material potential, linguistically.

To amplify this point I use a series of lightly finished projects, conceptual catalysts as it were, speculative architectural possibilities prompted by using language. Think: milled Baroque; pixelated architecture; architecture that behaves like a fast-change artist; spatial ventriloquism; the energy of line types; the analogous use of literary terms to construct spatial tactics such as aphorisms, metaphors, similes, alliteration; and architecture generated from the white space, not the black lines of the architectural drawing.

Consider the temporally active spatial characteristics pointed to in the

Spatial Blooms proposal (Figure 2), made possible by using provocative language phrases. Imagine spatial corsets and fabric predators in the midst of configured marble zipper blooms, scanning berm-like test tube surfaces, suddenly hiding in a bio-diversified architectural knot; these are spatial devices of wonder, a temporally-loaded and triggered architectural ecology, scaled and a-scalar at the same time.

Passport (Figure 3) is an internationally based collaborative book project, focusing on 24 individual approaches to documenting urbanism, the un-
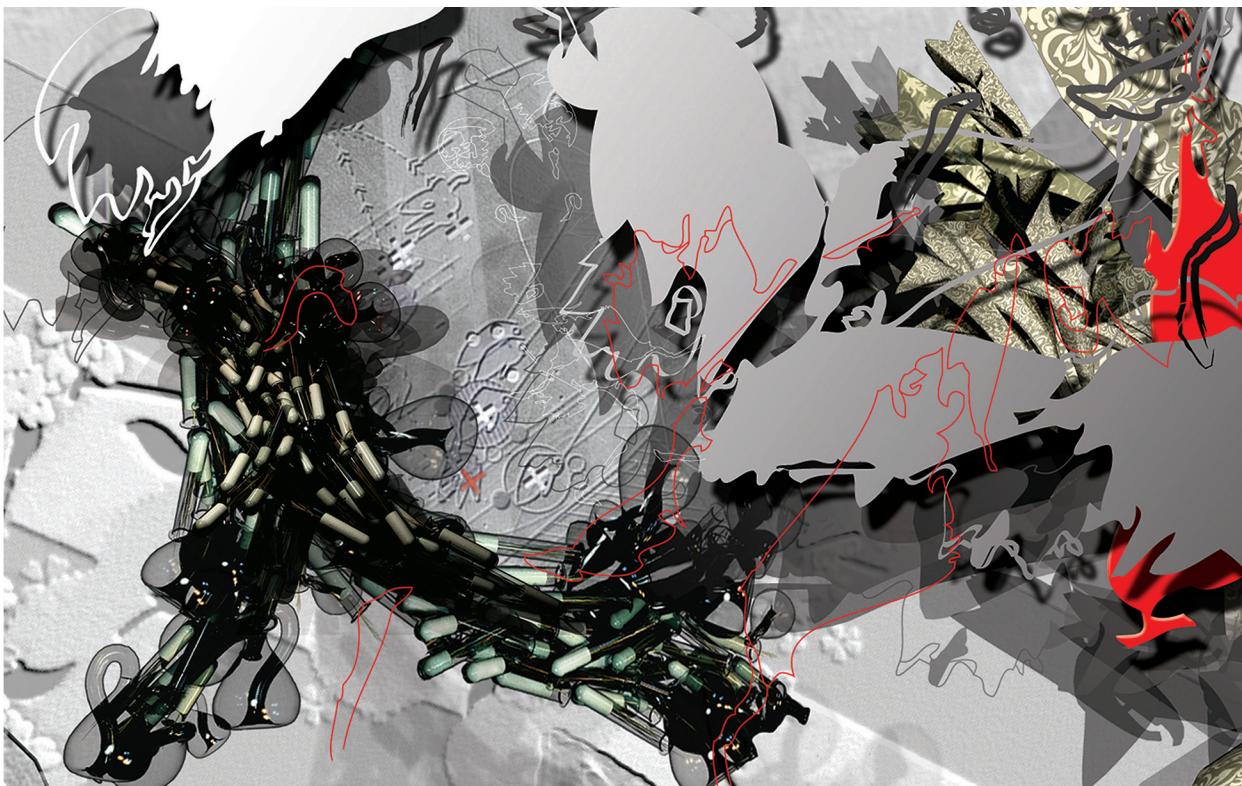
Figure 2. Spatial Blooms, *Panel 1, Detail. This proto-formal drawing detail modulates a play between two dimensions and three, supporting figurative aspects of the proposal, while cryptically encoding certain material and behavioral characteristics of the spatial proposition, which will be developed. as the work unfolds.*

Figure 3. Passport, *Alchemic Urbanism. This strategic thematic drawing visualizes interactive relations of non-physical aspects in a city—an ecology of immaterial states that anticipates an augmented and alchemic urbanism, harvesting residuals in the city.*

derlying theme of the book. In my contribution, the use of language prompts provoked an alternative and entangled urbanism linked to an alchemic play of underutilized, or invisible urban resources. Imagine over-coded and erased gold leaf residuals; soft metro blooms, waiting; shadowed, evasive speeds; milled surplus data; trapped marble glances or documenting bleached-out blue networks; extracting compressed cyclical rhythms; and tracing fabricated velocities.

Operating as pre-visual stimuli, these word assemblies are charged and full of unforeseen connections, predesign activity that motivates relational, material, and programmatic considerations otherwise held at arm's length. The language prompts can augment other design ideas, thickening the pool from which grist for the cultural imagination can be harvested.

(3) Analogous thinking

Derived from the Greek analogia, this design method operates through likenesses; that is, "this looks like that," "this behaves like that," "this is materially like that." Analogous thinking (one of 14 design methods I have identified and with which I have worked) can be a proactive ally for the architect, brokering deals with objects, events, and phenomenon out of one's design grasp, increasing the pool from which spatial potential might emanate. Analogous thinking can break down categorical and disciplinary silos, opening formal, material, and behavioral range for design opportunities. It is a colloquial design method, easily accessed, and increases our design capacities 100-fold, at the flip of a switch. Parenthetically, it is a design method that requires translation, because "this is only like that"; "this is not that."

Analogic references (important and advantageous in the *"Fast Twitch,"*

(Figure 4) or fast working parts of this project) include architectural conditions that look like paired cocoons and act like storage sacks dressed up like petticoats. The inscriptions on the garden surfaces communicate like hieroglyphs, and the garden surfaces are structured like a complex game board.

This visualization is a cross between a strategic plot and a thematic drawing, foregrounding the glyphic mapping and specific content bearing for the eventual spatial proposition.

The *Metaspheric Zoo* (Figure 5), an active cross between metaphor and atmospheric, is a design speculation for inclusion in the Prague International Biennale of Contemporary Art, situated in the suggestive space of a metaphorical drawing. The invented zoo is conceived to enable a range of experiences that oscillate between the tame or domesticated and the wild or savage, for humans. The experiences of the Metaspheric Zoo would be triggered by analogically structuring tendencies of animal behavior, spatially. These characteristics include: fluctuating territorial boundaries in natural habitats; animal behavior traits; and species interrelations through new material and durational assemblies. Imagine constructed pink light scanning a textured and scented surface, morphologically mutating and darting into the unborn night.

In design terms, analogous thinking can link stranded thoughts, which overcomes problem-solving mentalities while consolidating design thinking and acting as a launch pad for both necessary and unforeseen relations, full stop.

(4) Tailoring visualizations

When working, I raise specific questions in relation to the timing of design decisions: some ideas matter
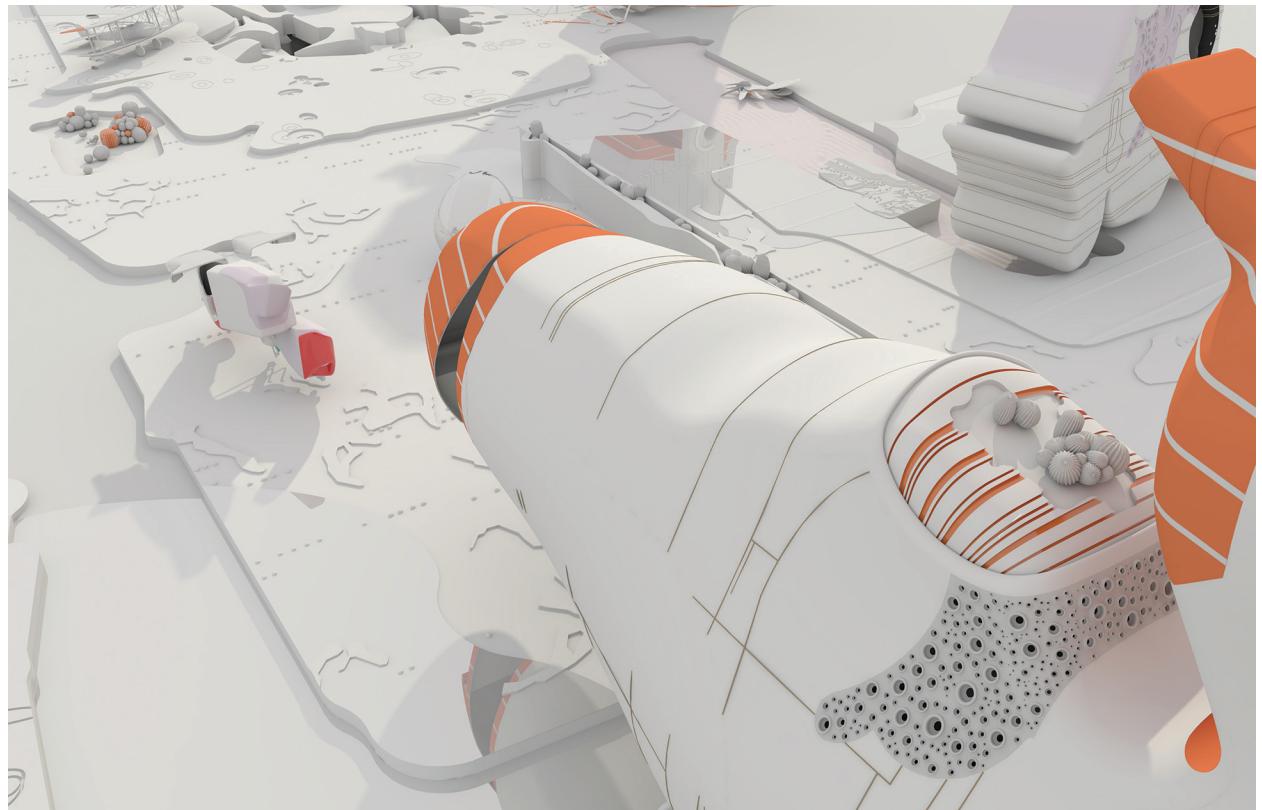

Figure 4. Fast Twitch, *Speculative Desert Dwelling + English tea setting.*

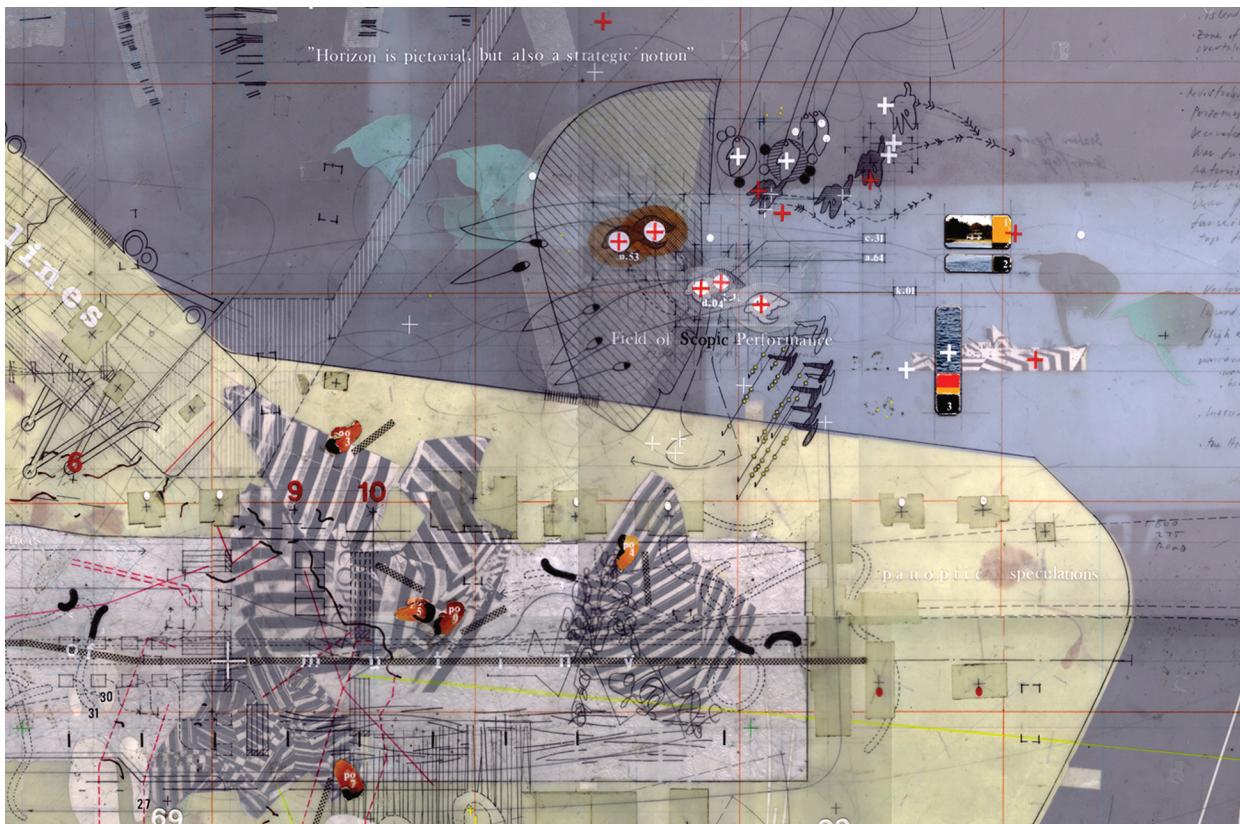*Figure 5.* Metaspheric Zoo, *Strategic Thematic Drawing (detail).*

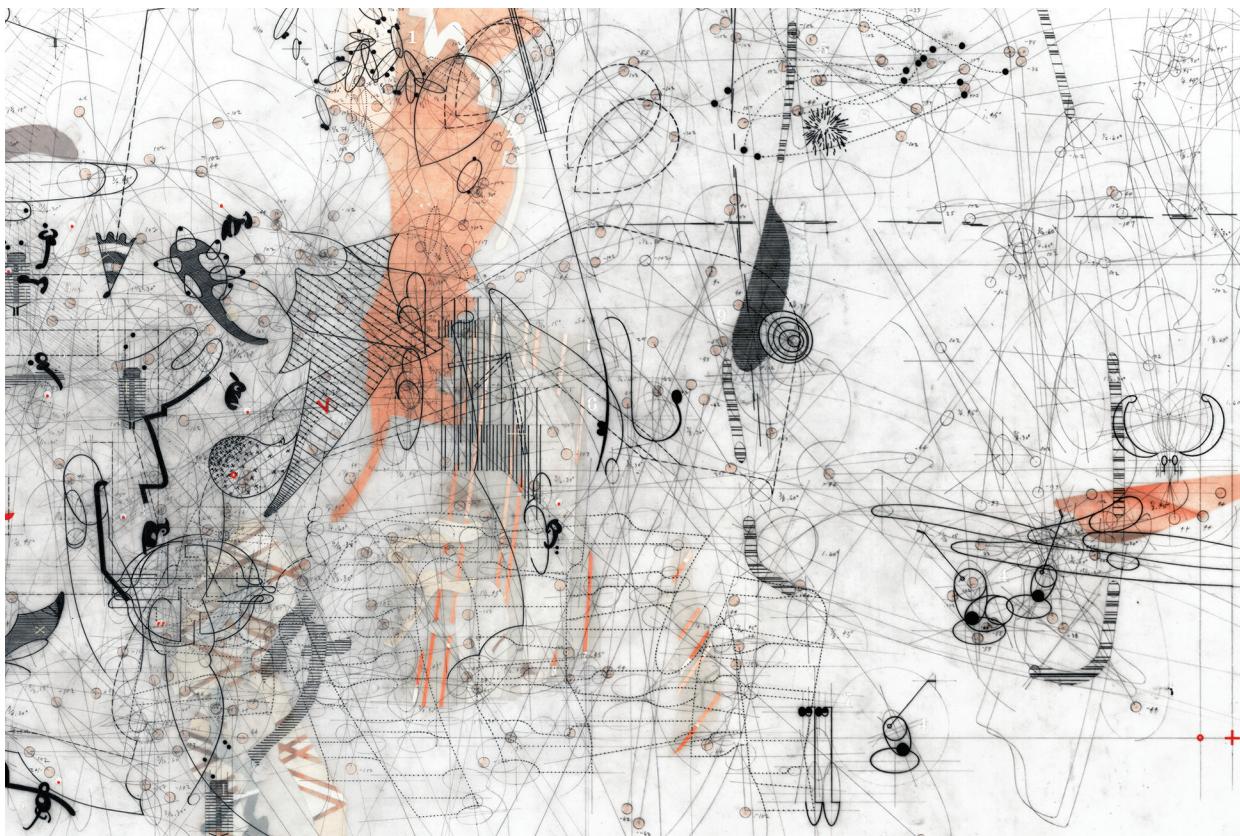*Figure 6.* David's Island, *Strategic Plot (detail).*

Figure 7. Central California History Museum, Cryptic Site Drawing, v. 02 (detail).

now, some matter later, some never matter. Due to the shifting nature of the questions I raise while designing, I tailor the representation techniques and design methods I use, exploring a fit between what's being worked on, how it's being worked on and when it's being worked on. In addition to using conventional drawings, I frequently develop other kinds of drawings that are task specific. Some are more abstract, some more figurative; still others use multiple languages of representation simultaneously. I develop each of these drawing types in order to work more appropriately on particular ideas in different phases of a project.

The strategic plot drawing (Figure 6) type was developed specifically for this project. It oscillates between a concrete spatial proposal and notations for further architectural and landscape architectural development, a visualization to study things that are changing, plotted over and through time.

This cryptic site drawing type (Figure 7) visualizes the genetic or chromosomal characteristics of a spatial proposition. Not yet figural, or even recognizable architecturally, these marks are full of formal and organizational implications.

In some ways akin to cryptic drawings, this proto-formal/aspectival section visualization (Figure 8) advances formal possibilities in a more definitive way. It is a mediating drawing, in which gaps might exist in the drawing and in the architectural features to which the drawing points. This enables insight into the movement between ideas and a formal and material articulation for the museum.

Architectural ideas must be represented, typically through conventional drawings. Drawings, however, are not inert tools and should not be taken for

granted. Rather, the means by which we represent architecture discloses particular values and specific ways of thinking. Although I believe in the value of conventional architectural drawings, they are not always appropriate to my design tasks. As a result, I adjust, or tailor my working strategies to design projects effectively, sometimes occasioning innovative visualization techniques.

Arguably, this approach augments more conventional design approaches, establishing a confidence that drawings have real latitude and are capable of supporting different families of ideas in the same project. Tailored visualizations are specific to what's being worked on relative to when it's being worked on, rather than assuming that the ordained conventions of architectural representation are adequate to the questions of design in a particular phase of a project. This approach also avoids the crisis of reduction, or reducing the pool of ideational grist too early. This enables transformation, overcoming the pitfalls of the linear development of a project. It opens design opportunities and makes connections where there were none, thickening the agents that might elongate the cultural duration of architecture.

(5) Heterogeneous ideas

I'm interested in supporting multiple families of ideas in much of my work. The architectural drawing remains important in this regard, facilitating relationships across different forms of knowledge and among heterogeneous ideas, increasingly relevant as disciplinary silos are demolished and knowledge across disciplines is shared and integrated. I explore expanded relations through different languages of representation in some of my drawings. These relationships might be linked to any range of things, including: discipline specific questions; relationships to phenomena and conceptual logics internal and external to a project; indeterminate conditions; and pragmatic considerations. I activate these relationships by developing figurative and nonfigurative drawing elements, including the use of words, indexes, notations, diagrams, and appropriated imagery, suggestive and promiscuous in their aggregative potential.

In the *David's Island* proposal, the key ideas for the project are visualized

Figure 8. Central California History Museum, Proto-formal/Aspectival Section.

in the Strategic Plot (Figure 9). The ideas are linked to: considerations of panoptic and panoramic vision; the potential of nautical cartography in relation to the islanders' experiences; the impact of suppressive military occupation of the island; conditions of remoteness and isolation; relationships of natural and constructed cycles; and maritime mythologies, all of which are supported graphically in the drawing. As the project transformed, these topics provided communicative narratives and relational assemblies, foregrounding the consideration of the history, physicality, and projective aspects of the island, sea, and mainland from a design perspective. This approach to drawing afforded the opportunity to actively integrate heterogeneous ideas, moving between hunches and certainties, disclosing possibilities about what the architecture, landscape architecture, and island might co-construct.

In the competition for the Central California History Museum—prior to developing the museum's specific architecture—a range of topics were identified and visually depicted in the thematic drawing (Figure 10). Such topics were determined to be relevant to disciplinary questions, to the competition brief, to Fresno, the host city, and to roles of architectural representation. Initial ideas for the proposal included: the metaphorical potential of varied mythologies including Dionysus, the god of wine, fertility, and agriculture; Daedalus, the inventor of architecture, sculpture, and the labyrinth; and the rhetorical potential of the nine Greek muses. Also of interest were: the aesthetic, scientific, and historic understandings of culturally produced artifacts; the ways in which the intellectual, curatorial, and spatial frameworks we construct qualify the ways in which we reflect on the experience of collections; and the sense of incomplete familiarity or the degrees of the permanence of representation of collected artifacts and spatial settings.

Arguably, a broad range of ideas, activated spatially in a project, might increase audience breadth, enabling multiple kinds of experiences that sustain the life, or scope, of architecture over extended periods of time. Augmenting homogenous thinking by engaging multiple families of ideas in a project might also allow relations to the past, present, and future of a situation. Furthermore, it might facilitate actionable disciplinary questions and perhaps robust engagement with key cultural circumstances and provocations of the time and beyond.
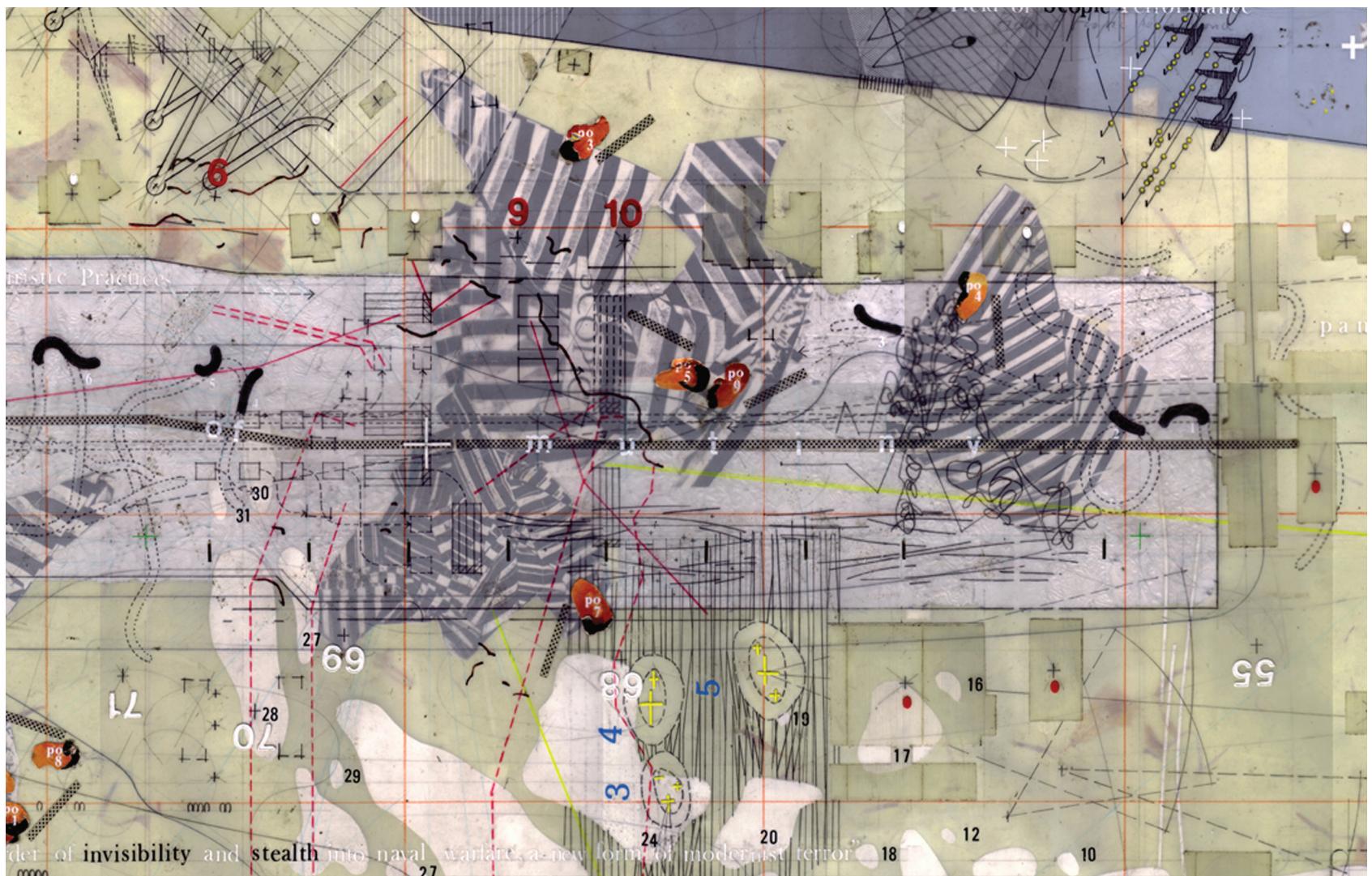

Figure 9. Strategic Plot *(detail). By using indexes, notations, and figurative marks this drawing detail articulates objects, events, and phenomena interacting over and through time, while simultaneously drawing out the key ideas of the project.*

Maybe…

The contemporary architect needs to be many architects, an agile cultural agent prepared to act differently in various situations. I am interested in developing innovative working techniques to consider loosely-defined and diverse ideas, demonstrating insight and designing appropriate responses in particular situations. I am committed to extending the boundaries of architecture, supplementing architectural and representational reduction, while structuring diverse cultural practices—a kind of ethics of complexity. These reductions are linked to the aftermath of "form follows function" and autonomous approaches to design. I am interested in how we think about architecture, how we teach it, and how we produce it, overcoming problem-solving mentalities and challenging homogeneous thinking.

Architecture mediates our engagement with the world. Normally, this mediation is limited by attempting to achieve a comprehensive whole in the design and materialization of a project. An underlying question in my work is how architecture can mediate both more predictable and less certain occurrences, the less tangible aspects of spatial occupation. In this sense, the architecture does not make sense of the events it gathers. Instead, it mediates those events, inviting the occupant to construct his or her own interpretation and foregrounding active participation in the spatial setting of our lives. On this front the aforementioned five points are accomplices to be sure.

In sum, these thoughts suggest that the space-scapes of contemporary society might interrogate the default positions that are commonplace in the practice of architecture—even within practices of the so-called avant-garde—challenging assumptions linked to more singular ideas about the capacity of form. The five points offered here might provide a way to reach productive relational entanglements in which architecture might traverse the worlds of myth, narrative, ambience, and the sublime, while trading optimistically on its means of production, its environmental posture, and on emerging paradigm shifts. These means could help navigate the seen and unseen, the virtual and the real and break down binary relationships. This might launch architecture and its transformation into other places, into another scope—a complex affair to say the least.
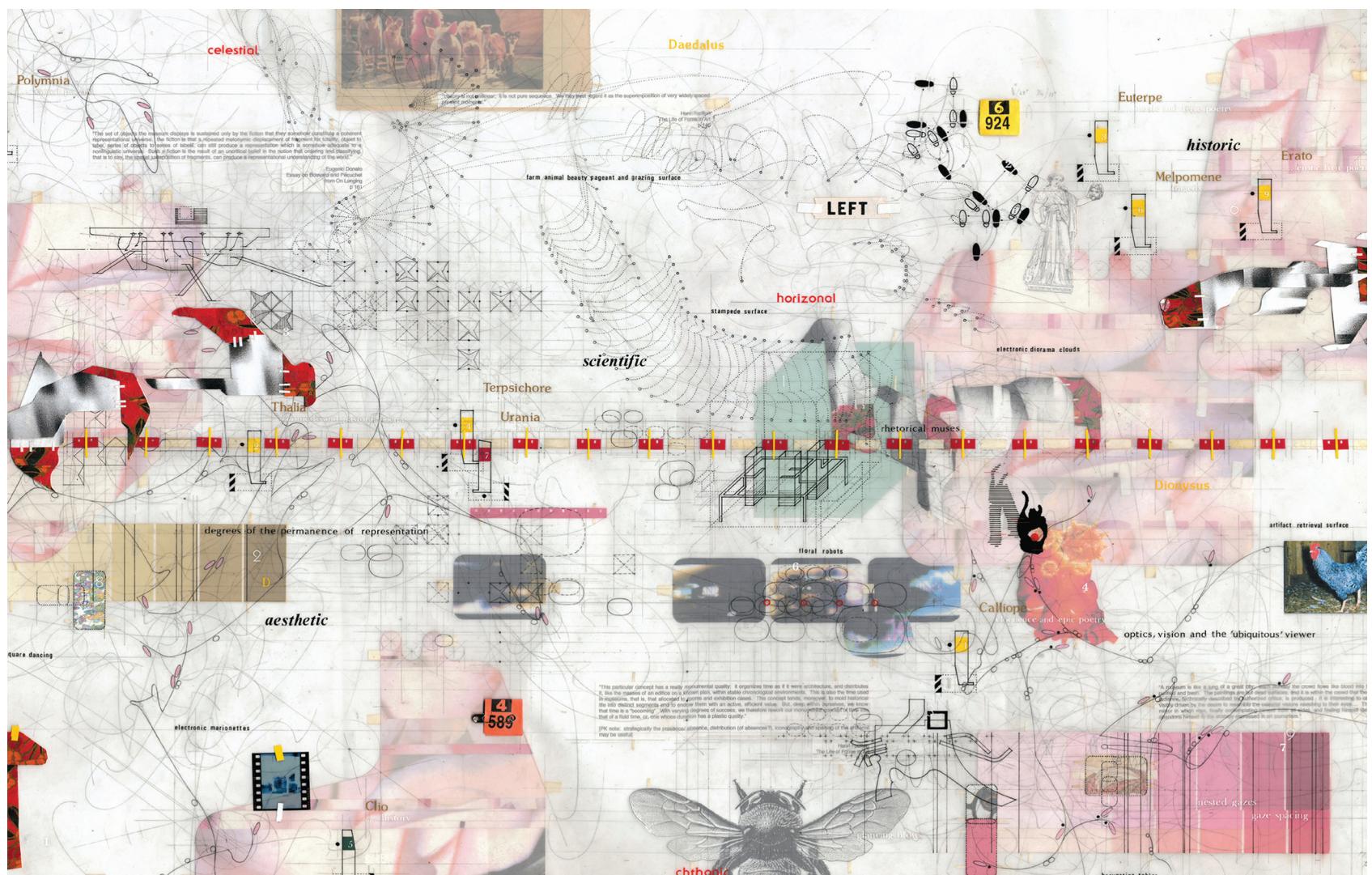

Figure 10. Central California History Museum, Competition, Thematic Drawing. Linked to the lineage of collage making, this drawing visually establishes the primary content for the project. The drawing is comprised of languages of proto-architectural marks, words, and images—a cosmology of ideas, non-scaled and non-hierarchical. The latent content of the drawing is of real importance.