

Fitting, or How Things Arrange Themselves

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Questions about complexity in architecture always leave me somewhat bemused. If one does ascribe to the view that architecture is there to provide answers to problems and that there are clearly prescribed methods and rules to deliver it, then one can, I assume, inhabit and work within a world of simplicity, happily innocent and always doing the right thing.

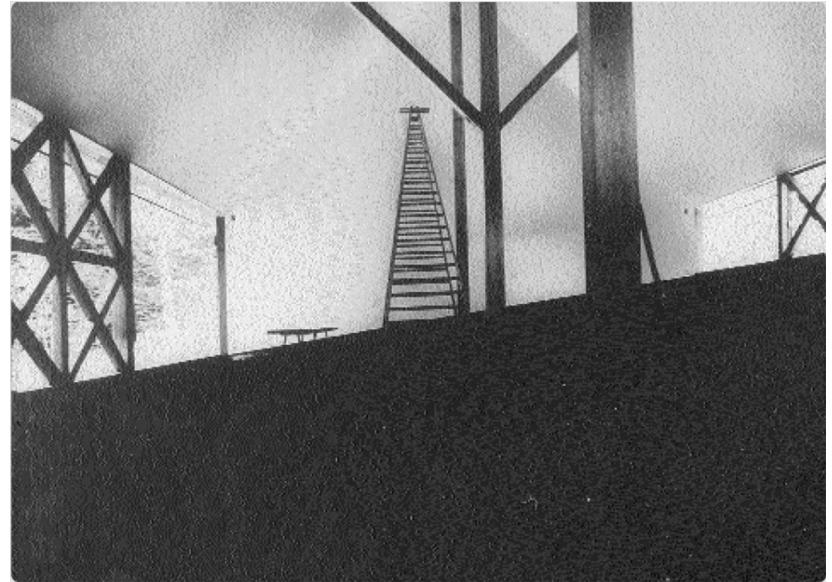
But simplicity (the antonym of complexity) is probably more complex than complexity itself for it encompasses, on the one hand, a naive and romantic longing for essence and times past and, on the other, a ruthless and highly ideological mission. To achieve simplicity is to edit out and discount a myriad of uncomfortable and illogical elements that do not fit. This may be cathartic but I suspect that whilst such a process of self-denial, or self-purging, may provide personal release and may result in a classic modernist idea of beauty, it is a reductive and individualistic process rather than an open or societal process.

So if complexity is not about control, conflation, reduction, and belief what kind of architecture are we talking about? Maybe we should start with the domain of architecture itself. I have always been fascinated by the dialogue between architecture as an object (for example, the house or a public building) and the city as a field (where, for example, streets, infrastructures, landscape, informal structures, data, events, crowds, and

abandonment all coexist and architecture is but one small component).

The Japanese architect Kazuo Shinohara articulated this conundrum through a lifetime's fascination with the city of Tokyo. Whilst designing and building a series of poetic, enigmatic, and sometimes sublimely irrational houses (such as the Tanikawa residence of 1974 illustrated here and described by Shinohara as a "meaning producing device"), Shinohara sought to undermine the modernists' claims to ownership of the city (which he described in terms of the "beauty of chaos" and "progressive anarchy") by defining architecture and the city as two separate and distinct entities. Whilst the architect may be master of the house, his role within the city is outside of his control and therefore a different set of tactics and responses are required.

One might therefore conclude that the lack of control that architecture actually asserts on the city is its most precious aspect. But does this all suggest that architecture is merely an autonomous and self-referential discipline with highly prescribed skill sets: an elite profession that faces extinction? Certainly the vast majority of architectural education continues to promulgate this line. Bernard Tschumi, in the 1970s, argued otherwise through his explorations into the perversities of architectural aesthetics and has argued for an "Architecture of Pleasure" whose "real significance lay outside any utility or purpose."¹



Kazuo Shinohara House, Tokyo

If for a moment we see architecture/complexity as play, new possibilities arise. However we will first have to take on board Johan Huizinga's essential criticism in "Homo Ludens" that the architect as a plastic artist can only work "by means of diligent and painstaking labour...The absence of any public action within which the work of plastic art comes to life and is enjoyed would seem to leave no room for the play-factor...The man who is commissioned to make something is faced with a serious and responsible task: any idea of play is out of place. He has to build an edifice—a temple or dwelling—worthy of its function in

ritual or fit for human use." But less of this seriousness! Architects are not bricklayers they are bricoleurs. Play depends on humour and wit, misinterpretation, the accidental, and the random, the ability to fit discordant elements into narratives and to re-strategize infinitely.²

Our architectural practice, based in London, has focussed on different scales of work starting out with small insertions into existing buildings and the historic fabric of London. Alongside a growing interest in the possibilities of materials and the tensions and opportunities in put-

ting these together we have, in each project, concentrated on capturing and articulating spatial conditions that transcend the exigencies of brief and budget.

To this end, for example, erasure and removal are key tools with which we can alter and defamiliarise a given space, preparing it for new readings. We have always talked of resistance; the resistance of materials, of site, and of context, and by this I mean that, for us, design is about both recognising and working with inherent forces and qualities that are given, while at the same time engaging these in a dialogue or play.

If simplicity is to do with reduction and the compelling logic of the conceptual, complexity is to do with play, with performance, narrative, and juxtaposition. In our publication “Action Research”³ we argued that architectures can be created by the playing out of simple actions or verbs such as to stack, to twist, or to fold. Recently we have been using the term “fitting” as a *modus operandi* to understand how to play the games of architecture and the city. Fitting has different scales and applications ranging from the bespoke customised space to the self-organising principles of informal urban development where the input of multiple players can co-exist.

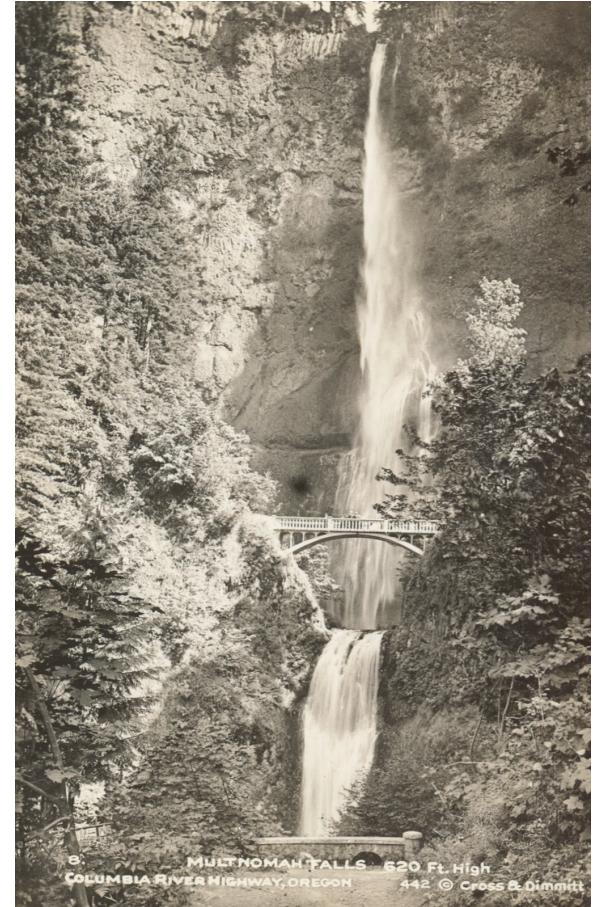


Fitting 1

The bespoke object perfectly fitted to its context both socially and aesthetically.

Sometimes a few millimeters are the difference between failure and success.

Sometimes the difference and distance between two proponents is to be maximised to stand any chance of survival.



Fitting 2

Loose Fit—a combination of chance and controlled accident that is then engineered to bring out and reconcile difference by highlighting certain readings and obscuring others.

Misfit—“something that does not fit or fits badly.” The tools of misfitting include: to overlay, to erase, to misread, to misinterpret, to collide, to obscure, to montage and to juxtapose.



Fitting 3

Dirty Cities—the city as a system of disorder is not a city of chaos but one of constantly changing value systems. It is inclusive, fluid and responsive to small actions. Matter, the adhoc, appropriation, rapid change and survival tactics—the stuff of Asian cities—become the key other criteria in this developing consciousness.



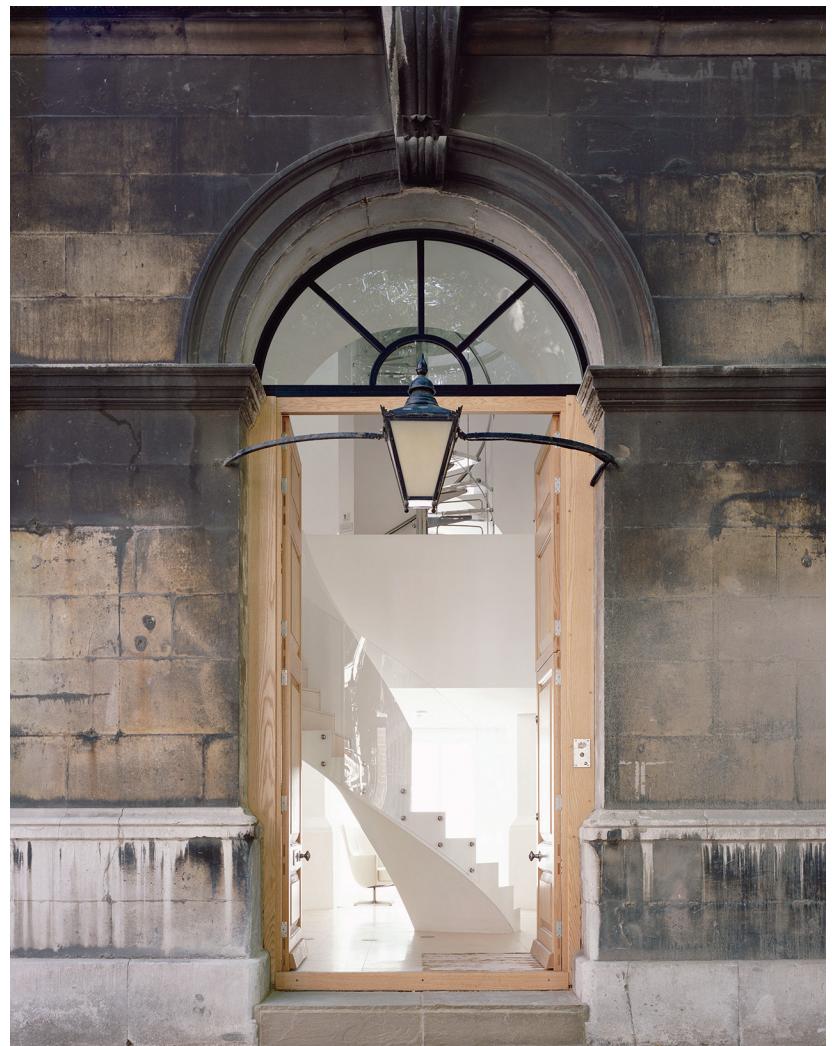
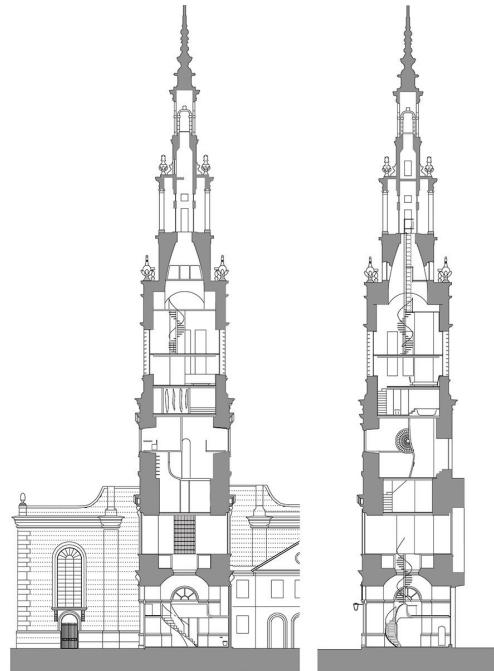
Fitting 4

Urban Actions—there is an elemental aspect to the periphery. Things just happen. Parasitical growths around motorways. Illegal housing beyond the tracks. Industrial abandonment. Large sheds. All seemingly random releases of pressure from the centre. How to operate in this field? These urban consequences imply a shift from an architecture that is expressive of the forces within the city to one that structures procedures for actualizing the city's fabric. In other words letting things happen.



Christchurch Tower London

This project represents the conversion of Sir Christopher Wren's bomb-damaged and derelict tower from the 1670s to create a single family house over twelve levels culminating in a nineteen-meter-tall volume with two mezzanines that houses a living room, library, and viewing platform. The first three levels of the tower are living areas with a dining room, a kitchen mezzanine, and a living room. The next five levels comprise a master bedroom, master bathroom, a double-volume space that houses two bedrooms and a floor with two bathrooms and a utility room. A lift rises from level three to level ten. There are three internal staircases, two of which are circular and one is elliptical. The existing stair within the northeastern wall was retained as a fire escape. New floor levels were positioned to maximize light within the tower.





Sliver House London

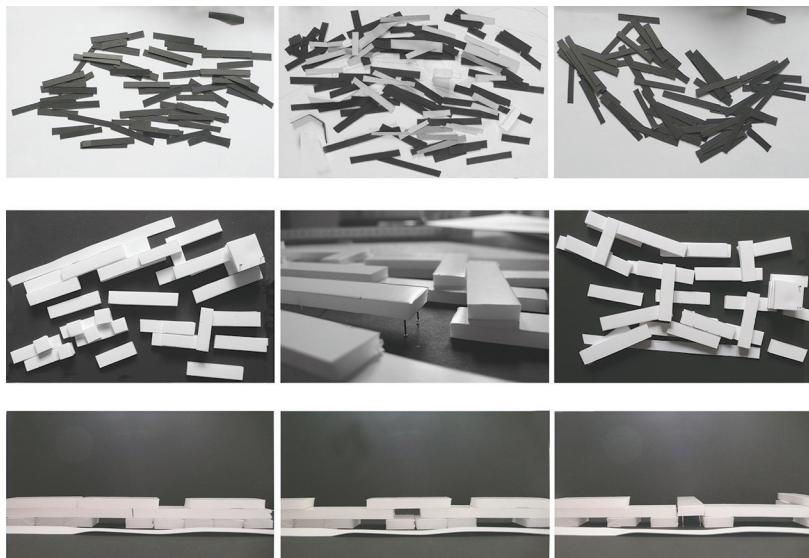
This project is a new build house in a complex infill site in Maida Vale, London, which had been left derelict for decades because there were no obvious ways to develop it. Wedged between two imposing Victorian end of terrace buildings with a street frontage of less than three meters, the site is eleven meters deep and 7.5 meters wide at the rear of the property. Each plan, therefore, took a different stacked form. The guiding principles behind the project were to introduce as much light as possible throughout the building whilst retaining privacy from the many neighbouring windows.





A New Town Center Klaksvik, Faroe Islands

New buildings are laid out in an east/west direction in linear striations that link both sides of the town in a protected way to encourage pedestrian use of the town center. Public buildings are organised in a sequence from the south to the north, providing a chain of attractions that leads to the open air event space and the boat museum and boating activities at the water's edge. Existing buildings and structures of historic interest are incorporated into the new center and connected to the new networks of circulation.



Notes

1. *Architectural Design*, 47: 3. 1977.
2. J Huizinga. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949.
3. Nicholas Boyarsky and Nicola Murphy. *Action Research*. London: Black Dog Architecture, 2001.

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