



Professor Iain Borden

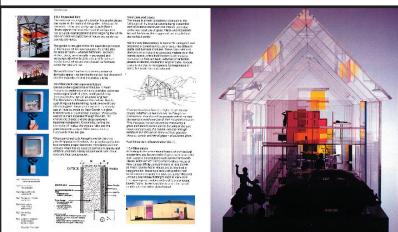
Machines of Possibility

Inaugural Professorial Lecture

Presented at the Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL

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In the course of this talk, I want to try and address one main question: what is architecture? Implicit within this are also some reflections on what or who is an architectural historian or commentator? And what is an architecture school?

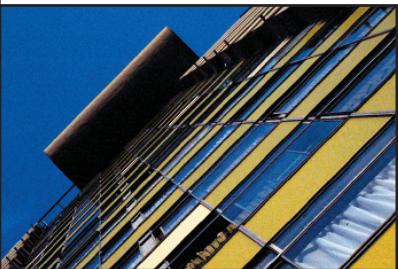
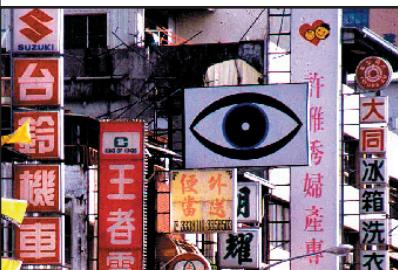
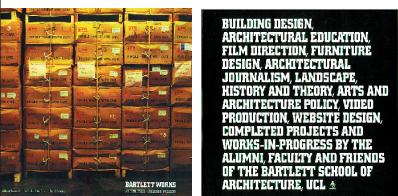
Architecture is Architects

Architecture is perhaps most often thought of as being the product of architects – that is of single people or small groups of people, their thoughts, designs and actions. And in this way, the history of architecture becomes the history of architects. This is, undoubtedly, one of the great contributions which architectural history can make to our understanding of architecture as a whole – who has been, or is, the architect, and what does he, she or they do?

This has been something which I have addressed – most notably in my work with Simon Allford, Jonathan Hall, Paul Monaghan and Peter Morris in the book *Manual* – a book which seeks to explore architectural practice in all of its widespread activities, from design and theory, to money and contracts, to ideas and relationships.¹ So this is very much a warts and all account of the architect, one which attempts not to glorify the hero status of the architect – although they are of course all heroes, all great men – but to explore some of the gritty underside of architectural practice and its very real challenges and operations. And AHMM have been particularly brave, even courageous, to commission this kind of book – there are few architects who are prepared to be so honest about what they do.

Architecture is Buildings and Projects

If one of the main themes of architectural history has been on what architects do, then the other main theme has been the focus on the products of architects: the designs which architects produce and the buildings which they help



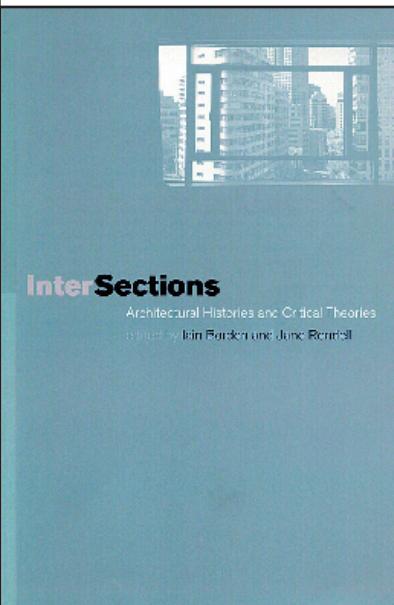
to construct. Traditionally, many architectural historians have been concerned with the production of architecture in this manner. And of course this is undoubtedly a promising place to look for a history of architecture and the city. Once again, *Manual* is full of this kind of thing, exploring different building types and designs from bus stations, health facilities and offices, to exhibitions, housing and art-based installations, to leisure facilities, conceptual projects and schools.

And this was also something which we addressed in the *Bartlett Works* publication, celebrating buildings and other products created by the Bartlett's former students and current staff.² And I think, like *Manual*, *Bartlett Works* successfully charts the huge range of products of which architects and architecture are capable, not only libraries, monuments, galleries, airports, restaurants and offices, but also belvederes, books, cartoons, billboards, exhibitions, films, videos and art installations.

Architecture is Everyday Buildings

In recent years there has been an ever-increasing interest in this kind of investigation, and architectural historians, including myself, have looked not only at the canonic products of famous architects – the great art galleries, institutional buildings, sports stadia and so on – but also at everyday forms of architecture, such as mass housing and street signs.

For example, one of the very first studies of architecture which I undertook in the mid 1980s was a study of some housing in the English Garden Cities.³ This was "Homesgarth", a quadrangle of residences constructed in Letchworth at the start of the twentieth century, designed under the heavy influence of the chief protagonist of the Garden City, Ebenezer Howard, who was also a resident of Homesgarth. Now I will not go into detail about this



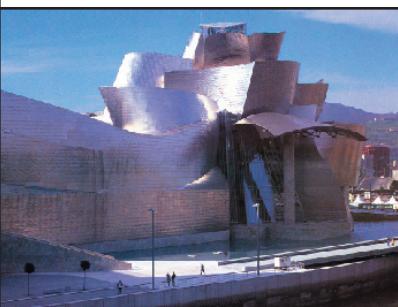
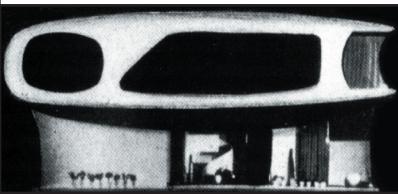
project, but suffice to say that it explored aesthetic ideas regarding homogeneity, diversity and urban content, domestic arrangements regarding people living together and taking their meals communally, and social ideas regarding class and gender, particularly the release of middle class women from the need to continually monitor servants. Architecture here then emerges as an intersection of design, urban planning and social ideologies as well as the particular experiences which people have of these buildings as part of their everyday lives.

This study of Homesgarth served to raise the question, for myself at least, as to the lived experience that people have of architecture, and how this lived experience might change the meaning of architecture. I will say more about this later.

Architecture is Theories and Histories

Thinking about architecture as the product of what architects do, as a set of buildings and other projects, as a set of monuments and as a set of everyday objects, is important. Yet it seems to me that there is an inherent danger in following this kind of path too narrowly. Above all, while the products of architecture may appear to us as a set of objects – this is, after all, what we overwhelmingly see in the city around us – in fact buildings of all kinds can also be understood, according to one perspective, as the traces of much more fluid practices and constant flows of money, power, interactions and ideas.

It is important, then, that architecture is not seen only as a set of things, and that architecture is not solely the province of architects, or architectural space as only the interior, surface and immediate external space of the building. In *InterSections: Architectural Histories and Critical Theories*, a book which I edited with Jane Rendell, architecture is interpreted according to a range of differ-



You know: the big blue and white buildings

ent theories and meanings: psychoanalytic, iconographic, semiological, gendered, political, racial and so on.⁴

For example, Beatriz Colomina considers the work of the architect Frederick Kiesler and, in particular, his project for the "Space House," in which Kiesler's notions of eroticism, seduction, texture and psycho-sexuality are brought to the fore. Sarah Wigglesworth confronts another seminal building of architectural modernism, that of the Maison de Verre designed by Pierre Chareau. By focusing on ideas of medicine, surgery and fetishism, Maison de Verre is interpreted in the context of disavowal and patriarchy within architectural practice.

In Murray Fraser's and Joe Kerr's chapter in *InterSections*, themes of postcolonialism, hybridity and otherness are explored in relation to the Getty Center in Los Angeles by architect Richard Meier and the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao by architect Frank Gehry. And again, Jeremy Till provides an intersection between the architectural projects and writings of Le Corbusier, Breuer and high-tech architects, together with the philosophy of Kant and Lefebvre and the literature of James Joyce, particularly Ulysses. His interpretations focus on notions of surface, time and dirt. Other essays in *InterSections* look at more everyday buildings and representation, ranging from the hotels of Las Vegas and the films of Jean-Luc Godard, to the structural details of Brutalist architecture.

These kinds of interpretation work to de-stabilise architectural semantics, showing that meanings are always provisional. And they show that architecture operates in many different ways, in terms of design but also through ideas, ways of inhabiting buildings, and the way in which people interact with each other.

I would like to say something here about the role of theory in architectural history and in architecture itself – a subject about which there has been at once considerable



discussion and, shall we say, narrowness of vision.⁵

Theory, of course, can be a straight-jacket, a place devoid of imagination and creativity. But, in the wrong hands, so can drawings and models, texts and creations of all kinds. But engaged with imaginatively, as the *InterSections* book shows, theories can be opening, enlightening, both grand frameworks and little nuggets of intellectual and artistic joy.

This occurs in two ways. Firstly, theory tells us something different to conventional historical discourses about the way people live. Secondly, theory provides an outside from which to challenge conventional representations. It is this double challenge – to the normative objects of study and to the framing of interpretative questions – that is theory's most important contribution to architectural interpretation. For example, dealing with matters of race, sexuality, class, social space, experience, political action, gender and so forth maximises the opportunity to learn all that architecture is and might be capable of.

For example, some of my work has been on the spatial, social and political nature of architectural boundaries, drawing on the work of Michel Foucault to show how different kinds of boundary might be used to repel, seduce or subtly challenge the pedestrian as they go about their lives.⁶

The first of these boundaries concerns a very physical boundary, a blue screen erected across the front of a de-consecrated church on the Kingsway, aimed at keeping out the homeless. This kind of boundary is brutal, immediate and uncompromising.

The second boundary is more subtle – a set of gates at the northern edge of the Broadgate office development in the City of London. Except that these are not really gates at all, as there is gap around which one can always walk. Instead this boundary is a kind of self-administered



turnstile, a place where you yourself check to see if you are the right kind of person to enter this semi-private, semi-public realm. This is boundary as psychological mirror, an architecture of surveillance made not from CCTV or a surveillance camera, but from precise design, a specific spatial and material condition, and a human subject, you and I, as we negotiate the gates.

The third kind of boundary is also psychological, but this time commodified. Here, a set of steps at Tottenham Court Road tube station has a multiple strip of adverts placed on its risers, using the space between the tube station and the street outside to announce its present. It is very clever, this set of signs, because you absolutely must look at the adverts if you are to walk up the stairs without falling over. This is boundary as ambush, a sudden and unwanted invasion of body space that cannot be avoided.

Architecture is Cities

As this study of boundaries shows, architecture is also urban, being intimately connected with the fabric and machinations of city life. But one of the challenges of cities is how we might even begin to understand them, for their very complexity and fluid, ever-changing nature means that we can never fully understand architecture in an urban context.

In relation to cities, my work has drawn on the writings of the French marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre, and in particular Lefebvre's formulations on the social production of space, everyday life and the politics of the city. Now this is not the place to go in to an extended exposition on Lefebvre's thinking but suffice to say his formulation on space is that social space is a social product, in that we make space and space makes us, continuously, over and over again. And that the process by which space is made is a tri-partite operation, simultaneously produced from



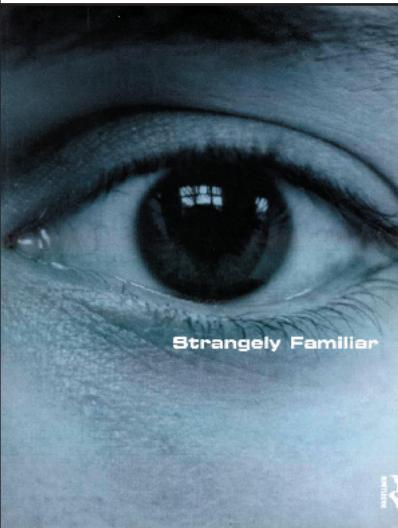
the objects and practices which people undertake, from the conscious ideas which we have of space, and from the actual experiences which we have of architecture and the city.

There is also a concern with values and meanings. Lefebvre postulates that it is not just in political parties, in great State structures or events, or in the great monuments of the city that we should seek ultimate human values, but also in the everyday actions of us all – in the way we go about our lives, our working, commuting and labours, and also ours joys, passions, intimate desires and beliefs, our own bodies and micro architectures.

And in terms of urban and spatial politics, Lefebvre sees the right to the city as being something which should be open to all peoples, of whatever age, gender, class, ethnicity or sexuality. Indeed, one of the central aims of urban life should be to not only tolerate but celebrate and encourage differences, creating a multitude of experiences, qualities and spaces.

So what Lefebvre does is to emphasise the role of the state, but also that of individual experience, to emphasise megastructures, but also micro-architecture, to emphasise the role of architectural and city professionals, but also the experiences of everyone who lives in cities, to emphasise the grand structures of history but also the personal narratives and multiple histories of the city.

This also means that where and when we live is extremely important as to the kinds of spaces and architecture we encounter, and which we can make. For myself, I have lived in various places, including my home town of Oxford, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, where I did my first degree, and Los Angeles, where I spent a couple of years at UCLA in the late 1980s. And of course these places have had an enormous impact on my thinking, teaching me about the global and the local, the certain and the uncertain, the



friendly and the challenging, the old and the new.

But it is London, my home since 1989, which has had taught me most. A place of long history and of great immediate change, of deeply rooted self-identity but also of hybrid and multi-cultures, London boasts the production of great buildings as well as an unbelievable intensity of creative and intellectual imagination, a world that sometimes seems to be a madly deranged interplay of consumption, action and surprise.

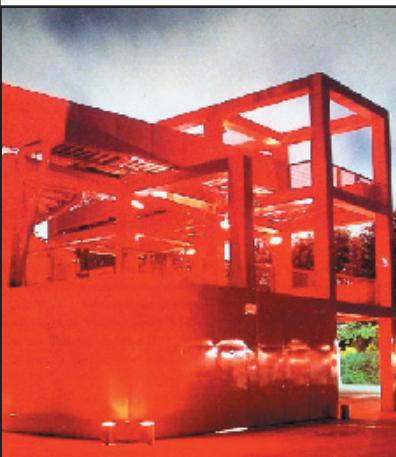
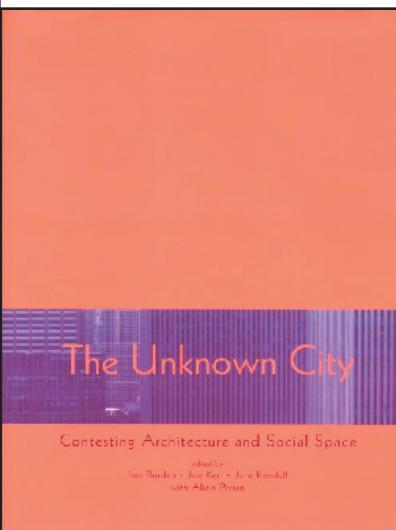
London above all demands that architecture be understood as personal and urban, an oscillation between the private and the public, the now and the then, present and future, here and there – London and its architectures is a set of multiple and often contradictory spaces and experiences, comforting and challenging, concrete and fleshy, solid and translucent, designed and accidental.

How I love it. London feeds, energises, demands.

Representations of Cities

How then does one respond to the complexity of urbanism and many spaces it offers? This was one of the questions which I explored in a graduate level seminar course called “Representations of Cities”, first set up in 1992, which we still teach and which has spawned a whole series of similar courses in other universities in the UK and indeed around the world.

Two of the things which soon emerged from the “Representations of Cities” teaching module were the *Strangely Familiar* and *The Unknown City* projects, which I undertook with Jane Rendell, Alicia Pivaro and Joe Kerr, along with a large number of other participants.⁷ In *Strangely Familiar* and *The Unknown City* we explored the various ways in which different people might experience architecture, and how these experiences might also be incorporated into architectural design and other artistic interventions



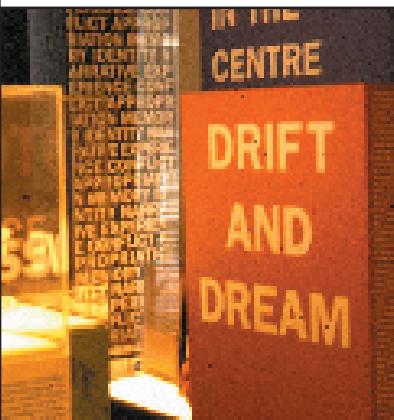
into the city.

I will say a little bit more about how these projects were organized in a practical manner in a moment, but suffice to say that we came to four conclusions, as it were, about four kinds of difference.

Firstly, different people. In *The Unknown City*, Doreen Massey writes about people of older age in the garden suburbs of Manchester, Jane Rendell about prostitution and masculinity in Regency London, and Adrian Forty about the middle class patrons of the Royal Festival Hall. The book therefore explores the idea that people of different backgrounds, races, ages, classes, sexuality, gender and general interests all have different ideas of public space, and they subsequently use and make their own places to foster their own identities as individuals and citizens.

Secondly, different spaces. In *The Unknown City*, there are explorations by Bernard Tschumi of follies and parks, by Nigel Coates of narrative spaces and metaphors, and by Fashion Architecture Taste of signs and the everyday. The book consequently argues for a multitude of different spaces and designs. Beyond the square, piazza and avenue, cities need hidden spaces and brutally exposed spaces, rough spaces and smooth spaces, loud spaces and silent spaces, exciting spaces and calm spaces. Cities need spaces in which people remember, think, experience, contest, struggle, appropriate, get scared, fall in love, make things, lose things and generally become themselves.

Thirdly, different times. For example, Barry Curtis explores memory in Venice, the artist Richard Wentworth studies the archaeological layering of time on London's Caledonian Road, while Phil Tabor investigates the artificial time and virtual world of the camera and surveillance. The project suggests that we need times that are slow and times that are fast, times that are linear and times that are cyclical. We need times given to us by our bodies and



times given to us through instruments. We need times which are quick and lengthy, light-footed and ponderous, spontaneous and measured, ephemeral and eternal.

Fourthly, different ways of knowing city. For example, Steve Pile writes about what lies behind reflections and below the surface or architecture, bell hooks think about love and domestic space, while Patrick Keiller explores the unseen and forgotten spaces of road lay-bys, ports and containers.

Above all else, then, *Strangely Familiar* and *The Unknown City* assert that we need spaces in which we encounter otherness and sameness, where we are at once confirmed and challenged. We need a city which we do not know, which we do not understand, which have not yet encountered, which is simultaneously, strange, familiar and unknown to us.

Besides the subject matter of architecture and cities which lies behind the *Strangely Familiar* and *The Unknown City* projects, another thing which I think is important is the way in which they were produced.

Although many people think of academics, particularly historians and theorists, as sort of hyper-solitary thinkers, working alone on their own autonomous thoughts and projects, in fact this is not always the case – certainly not for me. *Strangely Familiar* and *The Unknown City*, for example, involved working with architectural historians and also geographers, sociologists and cultural theorists, with architects, but also artists, graphic designers and video-makers. They involved producing books, but also symposia, exhibitions and workshops, badges, catalogues, posters and videos. In short, it involved working collaboratively and uncertainly, creating products which in some small way mirrored the workings of architecture, space and the city.

And of course what you can say about architecture and



cities also changes when you work in this way, for different ways of communicating have different communicative possibilities – by which I mean that an exhibition or a film might be able to say something different about architecture than might, for example, a lecture or a book.

And indeed I think one of my challenges over the next few years is going to be to explore architectural interpretation through different media, maybe film, maybe sound, and above all working with different people in new ways. And there will be a small glimpse of this at the end of my talk this evening.

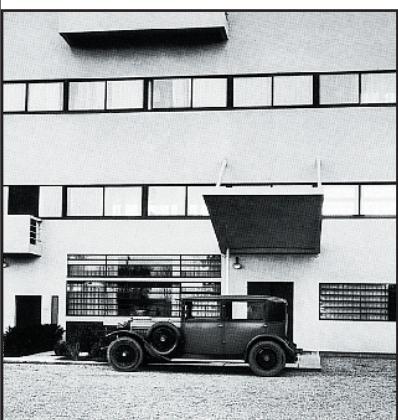
Architecture is Representation

One of the things which *Strangely Familiar* and *The Unknown City* really brought home to me is that architecture is set of representations – that is all the forms of communication used to represent it, from words and texts, to images and drawings, exhibitions and symposia, films and conversations. Architecture is a discourse.

Apart from big projects like *The Unknown City* book, these kinds of concerns have led me, for example, to consider the way in which photographic images are used in the discourse of architecture.⁸

For example, consider a fairly conventional image, such as a study of a Frank Lloyd Wright house in Chicago, photographed in 1913. This photograph emphasises form and light, and presents a kind of timeless, eternal and objective view of architecture. But what changes are made to our understanding of architecture when it is shown with people, when different temporalities are invoked, when a sense of movement or critique are invoked?

For example, in a 1903 image of Wells Cathedral by Frederick Evans, there is a sense of movement, of the viewer's body ascending the stairs in front of the camera, and moving upwards to the interior of the cathedral. Archi-



ture is here no longer a static object, something purely to be looked at, but becomes an active, three-dimensional space, something to be walked through, containing hidden and uncertain conditions.

In another image, the very famous photograph of St Pauls in the Blitz of 1940, taken by Herbert Mason, we see another cathedral but this time with very different results. Here, the building is part of an historic event, and so acquires all kinds of historical meanings to do with defiance, endurance and national pride. The architect and design are less important here than the role of the building as cultural symbol and urban presence.

Or consider a rather different image, taken in 1968 by the British architectural photographer John Donat, and showing the Boots offices in Nottingham designed by SOM adn YRM. Here, the significant thing to note is the presence of people, and Donat was particularly keen to emphasize the social role of architecture in his photographs, which consequently speak of modernism in a timely and evocative manner, as a social as well as formal condition.

Lastly, another famous photograph, this time of Le Corbusier's Villa Stein. This kind of photograph is hugely effective through its use of the dialectic, that is by bringing architecture into conjunction with another object, this time a modern sporty car – this helps to create a supplement to both objects, heightening the sense of technology, machine and modernity inherent to them both, and now written large across the face of the photograph.

In considering architecture we must, therefore, be careful not just about what we say or write about it, but how we represent it in images.

Architecture is Experience

So what does all of this imply? How might we have an architectural history which is concerned with producers and



consumers, with buildings and cities, with interiors and exteriors, with ideas, theories and people, with different kinds of images and representations?

To do this requires going beyond objects to processes, where architecture involves representations, codified conceptions of space, ideologies, and experiential as well as material aspects of building use. Above all, it means realising that architecture and its meanings are not so much constructed as reconstructed every time architecture is encountered by people, every time architecture's urban context alters, and every time architecture is represented in another medium.

In order to develop this line of thinking, I am going to turn now to the experience of architecture. Through work I have already completed, and some that I have just started upon, I am going to explore such conditions as texture, surface, transparency and sound, and also to consider their interaction with such social conditions as bodily motion, speed, humour and politics.

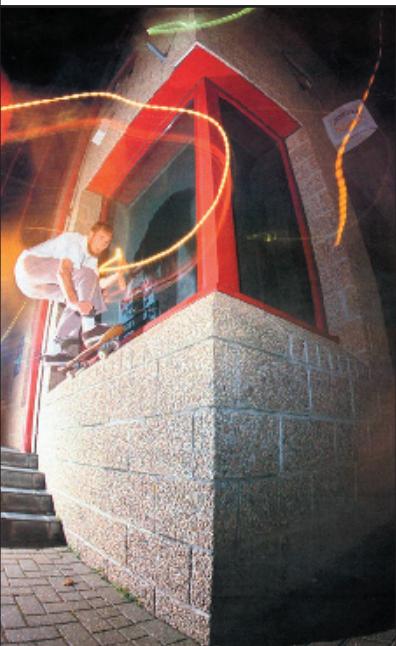
Above all I want to try and posit how architecture might be considered as an intersection of four things: firstly, the human subject, secondly material and architectural conditions, thirdly specific modes of engagement, and fourthly the creation of particular meanings. And within this I shall highlight the condition of movement - that is, bodily movement through space. To do this I am going to very briefly consider four quite different kinds of movement condition, and then to draw some overall conclusions.

Experience is the Moving Body

First I want to show you a short clip of a skateboarder - Matt Reason, streetskating in Philadelphia in the 1990s.

So what does this video tell us? Firstly, that skateboarding is related to the object-space-object-space rhythm of modernist space. Where architecture is con-





ceived and designed by architects and planners as a series of homogeneous yet discrete spaces, skateboarders recompose that spatial rhythm into their own urban run. The spatial rhythm adopted is then that of a passage or journey from one element to another, the run across the city spaces being interspersed with moments and momentary settling on specific sites.

This is not an activity which could take place in a medieval, renaissance, or early industrial city. It requires the smooth surfaces and running spaces of the paved, concrete city.

Secondly, it tells us that skateboarding is also a reassertion of the whole body in the urban realm, replacing the passivity of the tourist gaze or consumer shopper with a newly dynamic body, involving muscularity, balance, response, sight, and, above all, hearing and touch - all of this being recomposed in a movement of that body.

In particular, it is the sound of the skateboard over the ground which yields much information about the conditions of the surface, such as its speed, grip and predictability. Such things as the smoothness of pure tarmac or concrete, the roughness of a metalled road, or the intermittent counter rhythm of paving slab cracks, all combine to create a textual pattern bound into the skateboarder's experience of urban space.

Skateboarding uncovers a new physicality of enjoyment latent in the possibilities of modern architecture, in surface (concrete not cobbles), expansivity (squares not alleys), urban elements (fragments in space, not modulations of space), and, above all, the appropriativity of public space, semi-public space and certain private spaces. It is this modern city that skateboarding is at once born from and works against.

And, of course, there is an implicit critique of architecture in all of this. Skateboarding confronts the idea that



the city is purely a set of landmark buildings, denies that architecture is solely the product of experts and technologists of space. Skateboarders are obsessed with architecture, but they don't care about the Stirling Prize or who the architect is. The best architecture is a slidey ledge, designer unknown.

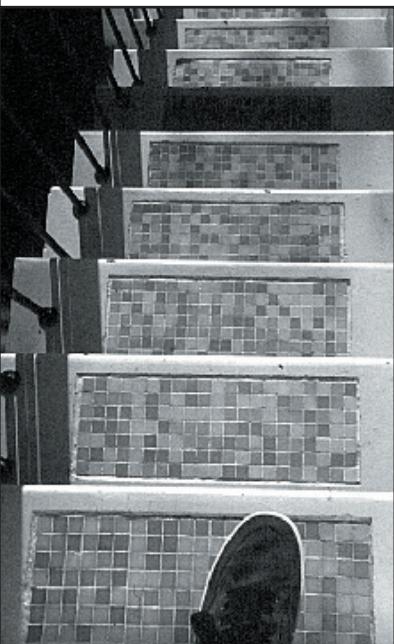
Skateboarding also subverts the whole process of production, exchange and consumption. Skateboarders appropriate space – they use the city without paying for it. And skateboarding suggests that the city and its public spaces are an arena for everyone to use, not just pedestrians and drivers, not just men in suits and those over the age of 21.

Above all skateboarding asserts that modern architecture and urban space are not just for work and shopping, for professionals and critics, but are a pleasure-ground of joys and desires. In short, skateboarding shows us one of the rich possibilities of architecture.⁹

Experience is the Walking Body

Enough of skateboarding. My second example was, until earlier this year, my own home, a 1950s two-floor maisonette in the Golden Lane estate in the City of London, designed by Chamberlin Powell and Bon. In particular, I want to consider the stairway, which rises directly out of the living room, with the treads individually cantilevered out from the side wall.¹⁰

At the Golden Lane it is when walking up and down, as one must repeatedly do during the course of daily routines, that one first encounters the unique phenomenological character of these stairs. Such a condition was recognised by Lubetkin when he remarked that 'any staircase is a display, it is a dance'. Lubetkin continues, 'and it certainly enriches the conception of human surroundings and the body if architecture can bring in everyday experience



a sort of ballet like quality — semi poetic choice — in what otherwise is a purely utilitarian conception.¹¹ So, following Lubetkin, a stairway can be more than a conveyor belt; it can also be a social stage.

While the quotidian body may be transformed into that of a dancer through the device of the stairway, so too is another transformation effected upon the stairs themselves. When experienced by the mobile and rhythmic body, the treads are revealed as individual planes, each forward step being met by a corresponding, independently-supported platform on which to rest, and, simultaneously, as the steps continue, by a connected series of such planes; the stairs are at once unique and repeated, autonomous and integrated. Ascending and descending, combining bent knees, measured steps and a cautiously balancing hand (for the Golden Lane stairway is unusually steep), one enunciates these stairs as a sentence, a chain of moments and movements each unique in itself yet inseparable from the others. Walking creates a unity of the stairs; hence it is the act of movement, together with the physical architectural element, and, not this element by itself, which makes the stairway. These stairs are complete only when performed by the mobile body.

After living in this flat for a while, another connection also gradually makes its presence felt. The stairs are made from hard terrazzo and when trod upon, each creates a distinct sound, such that every descent and ascent provides a short, repetitive melody to the life of the flat — a keyboard of everyday movements, punctuating space with its peculiar form of music.

Nor is it just one's own flat that is enervated in this manner. Each cantilevered tread is balanced by its mirror-element on the other side of the party wall, creating exactly the same stairway for the flat next door. And so my paced sound-rhythms are transmitted with extraordinary



efficiency through the terrazzo to my South African neighbours, just as their sounds are to me, creating a sonorous and social connection between our otherwise separate existence. After some years, I know when they sleep and when they arise, I know when they are in a hurry and when A. has put on high heels, just as they must know the same kinds of detail about us.

This, perhaps, is what is so intriguing about the stairway: its continual shifting from one condition to another. What goes up must come down, what is moving is also rendered as aesthetic form, what is given is always returned. The stairway may at first seem to be a linear arrangement, but in fact it is a transformative cycle, periodically rendering architecture and everyday life into a new and delightful composition.

Experience is the Humourous Body

The next thing I want to turn to consider is the cinematic work of Jacques Tati, and, in particular his well-known film *Playtime*, which features some of the most aesthetically beautiful of classic, modern architecture.¹²

At the start of the film, *Playtime* sets up a very passive human body, with the main character, Hulot, seemingly imprisoned with a series of constricted spaces, a world of compartments, rational decisions, and barriers. The body here is passive, controlled, dormant.

Yet although *Playtime* makes many such comments on the inactive body, Tati also counters passivity through a series of comic visualisations. For example a male travel agent is seen from behind, visible beneath a raised screen, but only as a set of disembodied legs as they scuttle back and forth on a tri-castored chair. This a gag about vision but also about the human body – we laugh not just because we can see his legs, but because of what these legs do, moving speedily crab-like between moments of precise



stopping and starting.

Modern architecture is a necessary prerequisite (the smooth floor surface allows movement, the modernist screen and front counter provide conditions of transparency and opacity), but it is only through engagement with the moving body that its comic potential is realised.

The most visible of bodies in *Playtime* is, however, that of Hulot, played by Tati himself. His is a body of active and not passive vision, asking explicit questions of the architecture of *Playtime*, such as which is inside and which is outside, what is this material, where should I go to, how do I get over there, or how do I get out?

Hulot's body here poses questions about domesticity, the public and the private, questions about gender and race, questions about information, direction and function. Hulot questions buildings, building managers and architects, and in particular their authority to control others.

Significantly, Hulot does not just see architecture but also moves through it, restlessly and without tiring. He constructs a spatial circuit, and, by the end of the film, the signs which were at first obeyed are now disregarded, the characters having learned to pursue their own instincts and paths, even to create bacchanalia or a fairground out of the city. The architecture of the city becomes not a maze but a stage of possibilities on which the characters move, allowing without determining their desires and directions. All of this is done with walls, doors, windows and roads, with words and glances, with actions, intimations, crossings and encounters. Everything is an exchange, a connection between people and spaces.

Architecture in *Playtime*, therefore, depends as much upon experiencing subjects, the vectors they trace, the perception they have, as it does upon architectural materiality or architects' intentions. And architecture is highly important – for it is only because of specific constructions





that engagement with architecture can occur, all bound up within the accidental nature of the city. Body meets body, maybe, and always through the materiality of architecture.

Experience is the Driving Body

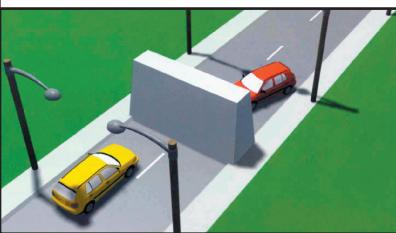
The last example of my work dealing with architectural experiences is some initial thoughts around a new project I am starting to work on, which deals with roads, the culture of roads, and the kinds of mobile experience of the city which this urban condition can offer.

It seems to me that there are a number of possible areas to consider here. Firstly, there is the actual design, construction and materiality of roads themselves. Now this is a reasonably well identified if not particularly prevalent area of architectural and urban history, and includes such studies as Reyner Banham's treatment of LA freeways.¹³ However, such accounts leave materiality pretty much as a history of construction, and do not often get into the driver's experience of that materiality.

Second, there is the social history of roads, exploring the social and political implications of roads. And here I am thinking of, for example, the kinds of study done by Marshall Berman or Matthew Gandy of Robert Moses and the construction of expressways in New York, or Peter Bialobrzeski's photographic studies of Asian Megacities.¹⁴

Third, we can have explorations of the spatial and visual relationship of the road and its adjacent structures. Most famous here is of course *Learning from Las Vegas* by Stephen Izenour, Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi. Here factors such as the speed of the car, the distance of architecture from the road and the expansivity of vision across the flat desert are significant, showing how the actual experience of architecture from the road might dictate new approaches to design.¹⁵

And of course there are various other versions of this,



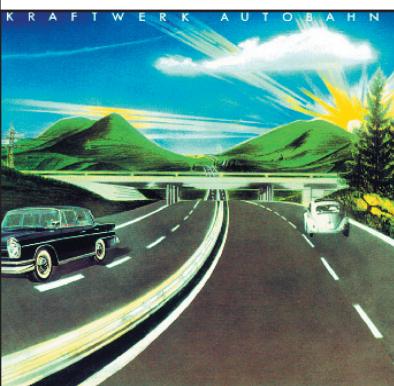
such as those which focus on the formal qualities and impact of roadside architecture and advertising structures. This is Ed Ruscha's seminal study of a Standard Oil petrol station.

There are also conceptual design projects, which project new ways of using the city roads. Or, in the case of this project by General Lighting and Power for a Car-Free London, of *not* using city roads.¹⁶

Another implication from *Learning From Las Vegas* is the visual view from the windscreen. There are many different versions of this, but, suffice to say that, the images of photographers like Chuck Forsman, who we see here, disclose how the road and the automobile traveling along it allow for a discontinuous, distracted series of snapshots to be made of a landscape.¹⁷ These kinds of image offer a social commentary about physical and social detachment, about normality, environment and the landscape of production.

And what this raises in turn is the difference that movement makes, when the road no longer becomes just a universal condition, and becomes a specific materiality that is exploited through its inherent potential to be moved across and along. And thus we have not only new ways of looking and engaging with architecture, but new meanings and interpretations.

Here then we have the fifth and I think the most significant area of the experience of driving, which is the kinesthetic experience. To give a few examples here, Sandy McCreery has recently done some path-breaking research into how places like Hyde Park and Regents Park were designed as places of velocity, somewhere to speed in a carriage.¹⁸ Clearly there are similar conditions to be investigated in urban roads in more recent years, concerning the aesthetic and kinesthetic experience of speed, straights, bridges, corners, tunnels and arches.



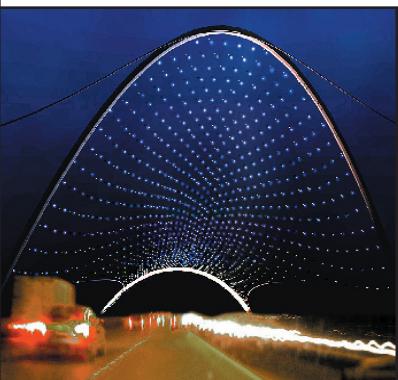
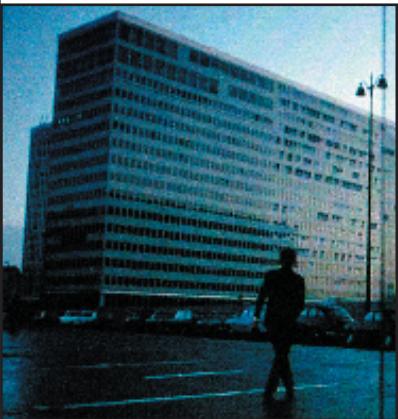
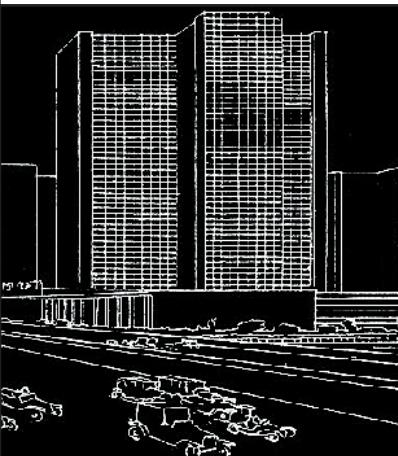
In another context, what about the experience of roundabouts, the way they offer a very peculiar form of spatial efficiency, or the way in which they suspend critical thought?¹⁹

Or we might consider our experience of the driving surface of the road and the motorway, and its attendant conditions of monotony, uniformity, repetition and flat emotionlessness.²⁰

All of this is, of course, epitomised in Kraftwerk's seminal recording, *Autobahn*, whose original LP cover you see – and hear – here.²¹ Here we have an aural counterpart to the materiality of the road – and indeed, this is something which I want to further explore in my new work, how the spaces of the city and its architectures might be represented in visual and non-visual ways. How might we give analysis and expression to the intense emotional as well as social presence which different architectures present to the city and its peoples?

So, what is this phenomenological experience of the materiality of the road, driving and its architectures? Well, like skateboarding, we seem to have here a particular urban material condition some of whose political, architectural and social qualities or implications are released through an engagement with movement. But of course driving is a much more prevalent urban activity even than skateboarding – everyone drives or is driven – and it consequently raises a whole raft of urban issues, ranging from notions of privacy against publicity, exhilaration against risk, government control against freedom of will, the design of cities as networks as rather than as a set of places, or perhaps roads as a celebration of modernity set against protests that resist bureaucratic stridency.

Above all it seems to suggest to me that different kinds of road, different kinds of driving and different kinds of mobile engagement will lead to different kinds of meaning



and social experience.

So what can be concluded from this set of observations about experience, movement and architecture? Firstly, I would want to contend that the experience of architectural materiality is not in any way about universals of social being, or somehow about certain essentials of materials - there are no eternal truths, innate meanings or mythic qualities within architecture. Secondly, therefore, any experience of materiality must be understood as a continual production and reproduction of that condition. And this condition involves four things: an acting subject, a mode of engagement, a condition of materiality, and a resultant meaning and critique.

Architecture is Machines of Possibility

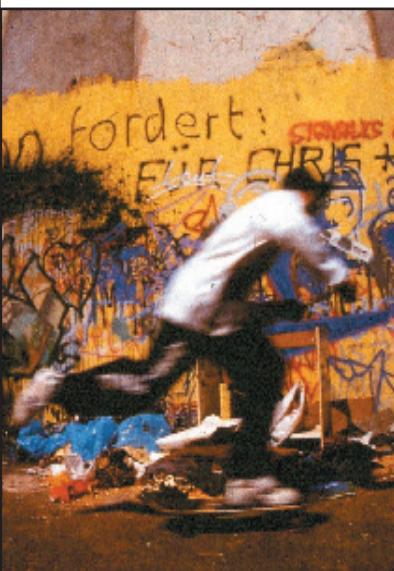
What I hope to have at least intimated at here, therefore, is that specific material conditions in architecture such as glass, concrete or tarmac, texture, transparency and sound, may be engaged with through different activities such as skateboarding, looking, walking or driving, and through different modes such as focus, distraction, humour or framing, and that different meanings may result, such as those to do with ownership, control, pleasure and contemplation.

In short, various different material conditions within architecture allow for different kinds of experience to be had of them. In turn, these experiences can then help to reveal and say something different about the architecture and its social meaning. For myself, it is in such engagements that there rests the full social potential of architectural materiality, and where it becomes a true machine of possibilities.

Now let me say this again, but in a different manner. The next two pieces are not produced by myself, but other people.



The first is by my colleague Nic Clear, using my text, and responding to the ideas I have presented in this talk. I think it shows some glimpse of the way in which different voices, images, ideas and architectures might come together to interpret and speculate about architecture. So many, many thanks to Nic, and all who participated.



Architecture is objects and practices (the things we do and the things we make). Architecture is ideas and theories (what we consciously think and believe). And architecture is experiences (the way we interact with architecture, move through it in different ways, engage with it in different attitudes and actions). So architecture is inherently unpredictable and uncertain. Or, to put it another way, architecture always has the potential to be truly new and stimulating, a catalyst to all manner of thoughts and purposes. This is why architecture is a set of machines of possibility.

The most radical of all architectures suggests that architecture is not just a building, that architecture is not just what architects do, not just what people experience or write. The most radical of architectures is all of these things, and asserts that architecture must continue to change if it is to meet the aspirations and desires of our future lives.

Most importantly, it is also ourselves who must change in this process. We too have new possibilities. So, we can say that the most radical architecture is that which dares to say, "what is architecture?" and "who are we?" in the same breath.

This is why I place skateboarding as a practice, or Jacques Tati's films, or AHMM's range of work-





ing practices, or Lefebvre's writings, or a housing project in Letchworth, or a conceptual project by GLP, all on the same plane. They all provoke this most important of architectural questions: what is architecture, and how can we live our lives differently, and to the fullest extent of our capabilities, energies, ideas, and desires?

And this is also what a school of architecture should be. Certainly a school is concerned with the education of future architects. But to do this properly involves not just core factual information or skills training, but education in a truly university sense of the term, a place of exchanges and questions, disputes and trials, speculations and experiments.

The Bartlett School of Architecture at UCL is able to explore this through work by staff and students, through exhibitions, talks, crits, publications, books, designs, buildings and strange devices and writings of all kinds. Here, we ask questions of ourselves, we ask questions of architecture and of cities, and we give potential answers through designs, words and speculations. An architecture school is yet another machine of possibilities.

The second is another skateboarding clip, but quite distinct to the last one we saw. Earlier this year we had an exhibition of images by Angus Leadley Brown, using a technique known as synchroballistic photography – and the movie clip we are going to see is a cinematic development of this work. The camera work is by Badger – Rich Holland – and I only got hold of a copy of this yesterday, so thanks to Angus for letting me show a short excerpt this evening.

Now these are very different pieces, but what they



both say is that architecture is provisional and uncertain, that architecture is about use, experience, buildings and spaces, and different kinds of movement and representations.

What they also say, by implication, is something about a school of architecture, and how we have different relations with people – sometimes contractual, with those who teach and learn here (like myself and Nic), sometimes professional, with those in the world of architectural practice (particularly all of the professional architects who teach here, come to crits, examine or employ our graduates), sometimes academic, with colleagues in other departments and universities, and sometimes less formal, with those who share some of our interests, who for example, like Angus, might exhibit their work here.

Architecture is Individual and Collaborative

This brings me to my final point, which is that to be a professor is not to be solely an individual, but a person within the larger context of this wonderful school and university. And I have learned – am learning – so much from my students, friends and colleagues, nearly all of whom I have first met through the world of architecture. If architecture is a collective as well as individual practice, then so to is the world of the academic in architecture – and it is important that I pay some proper attention to this condition. So to all of you – all of those who work with me, talk to me, communicate and exchange, my gratitude, respect and friendship – and so very many thanks to all of you for coming along this evening.

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*Wir fahr'n fahr'n fahr'n auf der Autobahn
Vor uns liegt ein weites Tal
Die Sonne scheint mit Glitzerstrahl
Die Fahrbahn ist ein graues Band
Weisse Streifen, gruener Rand
Jetzt schalten wir ja das Radio an
Aus dem Lautsprecher klingt es dann:
Wir fah'r'n auf der Autobahn...*

*[We are driving on the Autobahn
In front of us is a wide valley
The sun is shining with glittering rays
The driving strip is a grey track
White stripes, green edge
We are switching the radio on
From the speaker it sounds:
We are driving on the Autobahn]*