

Tensions.

Design proposals for the Confucius Institute at The University of Auckland

George Fraser Gallery, Auckland, 24 – 29 August 2010

Work by Yan Chen, Joseph Crowe, Angus Muir, Bhavina Patel, Divya Purusotham, Min Tian and Cynthia Yu. Curated by Mike Davis and Sou Muy Ly

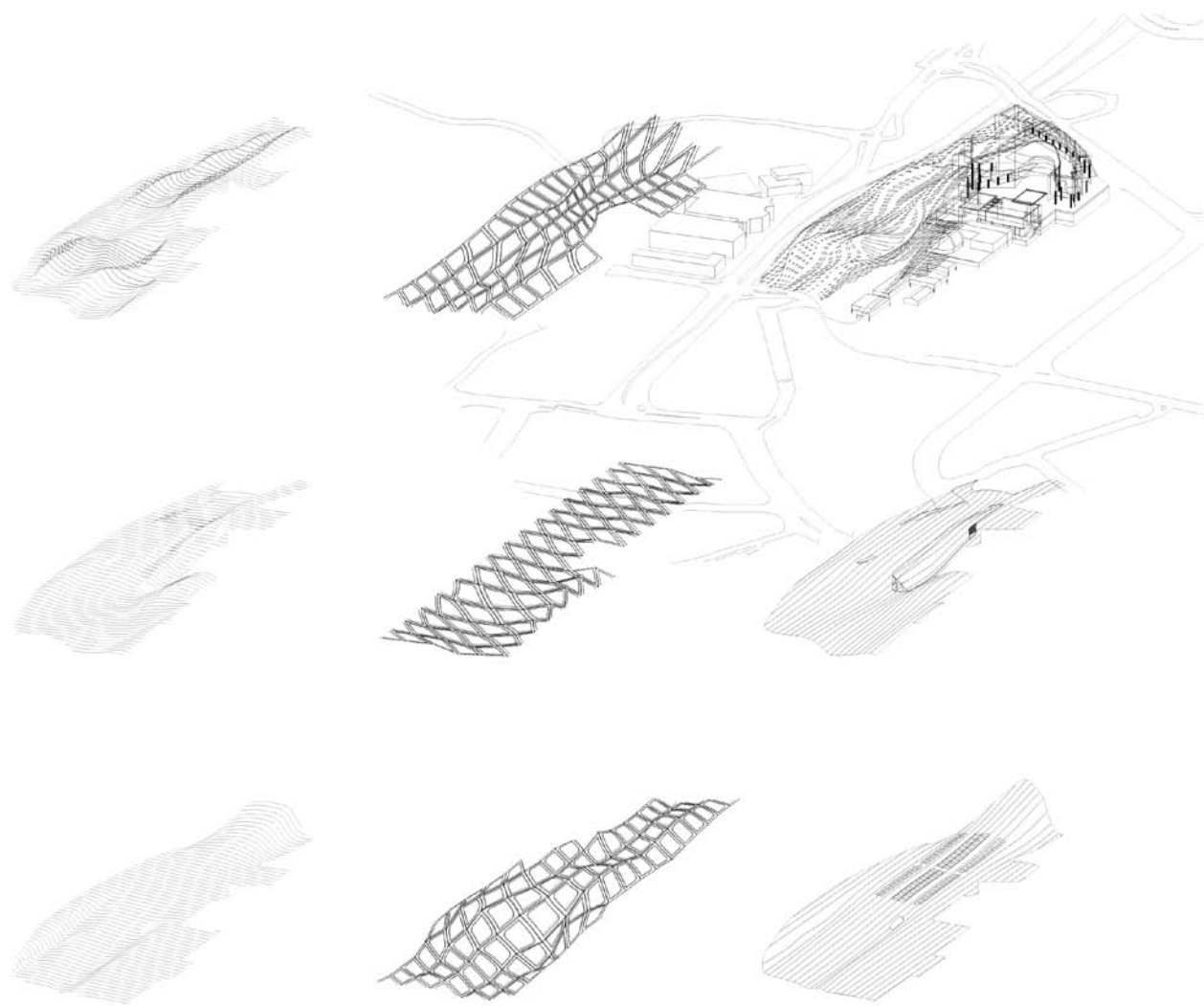
Review by Carl Douglas

Although *Tensions*, an exhibition of work by MArch(Prof) students from The University of Auckland's School of Architecture and Planning, addresses a concrete brief for the Confucius Institute, it is best viewed as an index of architectural process. Dressed in the matte white uniform of the gallery, it may take a moment to notice that the work doesn't advance a unified stylistic agenda: within the group are represented Siza-like plays of mass and volume, continuous surfaces like those of Foreign Office Architects, programmatic envelopes like those of OMA, hybrids of Chipperfield and RCR Arquitectes, and Fujimoto-style villages. What the work shares is an experimental approach to the instruments of architectural generation: sections, diagrams, maps, algorithms.

The graphic preference for the lucid and orderly cannot mask a state of agitation within each project. There is only provisional completeness to be found here. The process is non-linear, interrogative, and intensive. A collectively-produced sketchbook opens a window into the raw state of design that is welcome in a context obsessed with completeness and closure. Mike Davis, in his catalogue essay, describes an oscillation between the material practice of representing and reflective cross-examination. Sarah Treadwell, in her adjacent essay, speaks of



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(Photo by Sou Muy Ly)



this oscillation as a kind of high-wire dance along the line of the cutting-edge, writing: “The danger for the maker lies in going too far or not far enough; there is no certainty in decision-making – just a strange sense of rightness, a momentary satisfaction with one particular cut or instance” (2010: 4). This sense of feeling one’s way in design is directly implicated in the selection and design of the architect’s toolkit.

Design tools are not necessarily physical implements. A conceptual framework like Renaissance perspective is a tool, as is a Gantt chart, a digital algorithm like a Grasshopper script, or analog algorithms like those of sciagraphy. A minimum definition of “tool” might focus on its basic role as a differentiator or translator: something that generates a difference or produces a transformation. The exhibition sketchbooks reveal the operation of tools ranging from muscular and assertive to delicate, from general to specific, from theoretical frameworks to life-hacks, project strategies to spatial patterns.

Diagrams, for example, are prominent. As a kind of affine representation, they are minimally specified and portable: articulating a structure rather than an image. A topological circulation diagram, for instance, could find infinite concrete applications. But diagrams should not be understood as a “free” state which is then constrained by practicalities or codes. On the contrary, diagrammatic operation must always be balanced with a corrective – the understanding that the world is, strictly speaking, irreducible. One of the strategies deployed to this end here is the pairing of abstract diagrams with a more heavily coded representational tool like section drawing. Davis explained to me that, far from strangling the projects, he found representational strictures released the designs from the designer’s mind into the open space of external relation.

Another class of tool is the architectural pattern. One recurring pattern in *Tensions* is the architectural device of using through-passage to break institutional seals and maximise the surface of contact with the mobile public of the university campus. Joseph Crowe, for example, positions a series of folded ramps threaded through the building skin, allowing a pedestrian shortcut to brush up against the meandering programme of the interior. Similar in strategy although not in appearance, Cynthia Yu proposes that pedestrians filter through a cellular village. Angus Muir is the limit-case of this approach: pointing out that the requirements for meeting-spaces, lecture theatres and function rooms can already be accommodated in existing university spaces, he elaborates a plaza stretching from the clocktower to the northeastern edge of the campus, providing the institute with a far greater public face than a single building could. These students, resist the idea that the site be a closed venue, a perimeter within which the two nations with which the Confucius Institute is concerned – China and New Zealand – are permitted only formal encounters; in doing so they fulfill the Institute’s collaborative and public spirit.

Seeking and producing site disturbance was another effectively-deployed tool. In the same way that Lucretius’ atoms generate all the world’s complexity and differentiation from the merest of swerves, complex and elaborate proposals arise from the smallest detail of the site’s specificity. Bhavina Patel, finding that the historical coastline bites the edge of the site slightly, uses this disturbance to generate a volumetric play of deep shafts and shadowy voids. Yan Chen samples the density of the foliage on the site. Divya Purusotham reifies tiny slivers of shadow. Min Tian treats the site as a uniform field plastically deformed by external pressures.

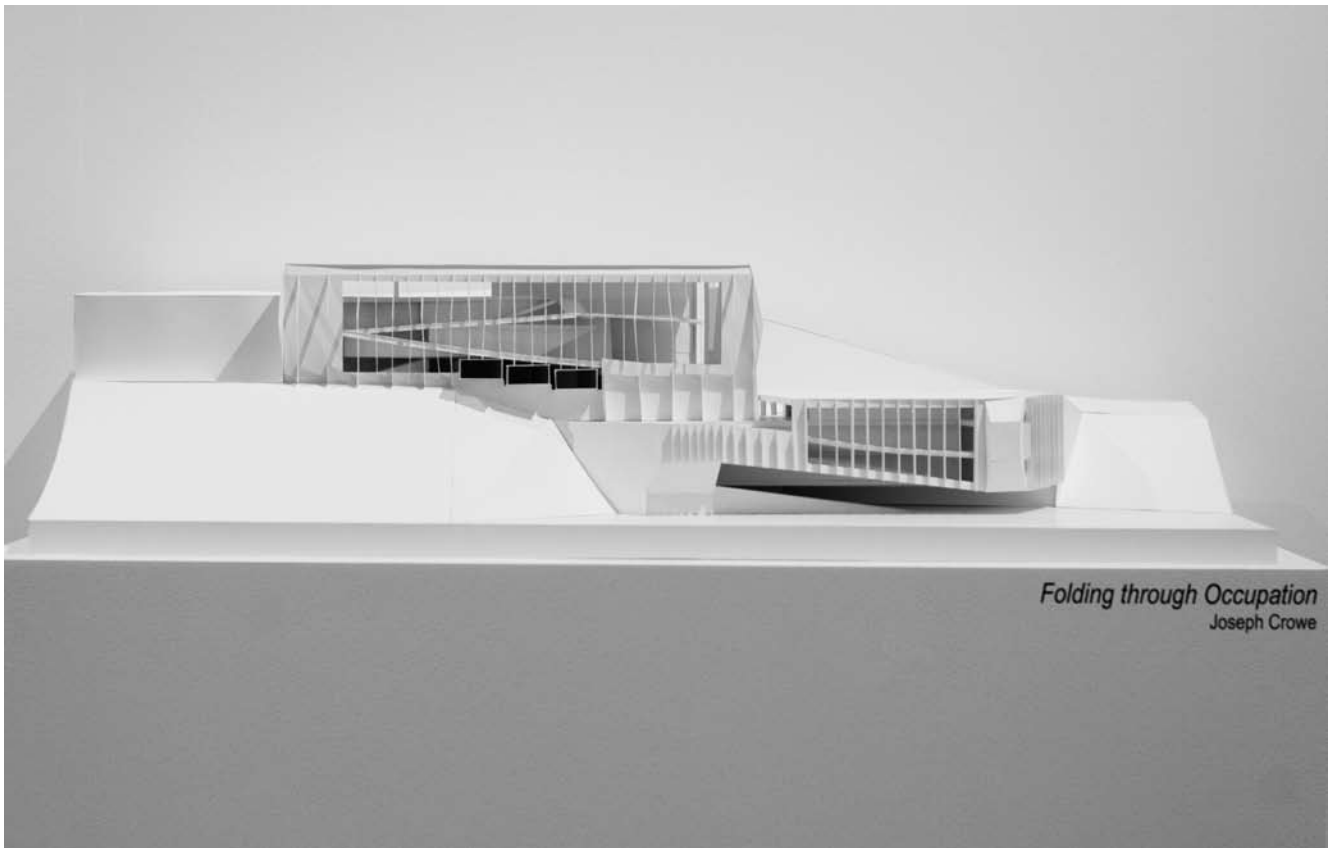
By analysing the site for something that individuates it, distinguishes it from any other place, the site itself becomes a generator, not just a canvas.

According to Richard Sennett there are two types of expertise: antisocial, in which each problem is treated in isolation by means of rules; and sociable, which “addresses other people in their unfolding prospects, just as the artisan explores material change” (2008: 251). Finding ways to open up the design process to external agents, pressures and effects is not a limitation on the artistic freedom of the designer. On the contrary, we should welcome the displacement of a singular antisocial designer in favour of more exhaustive engagement with a dynamic world of mixed agencies.

Architecture might be better defined in terms of its craft: instrumentally or equipmentally, rather than institutionally. Generative strategies like those exhibited in *Tensions* cause us to refocus on architectural craft. Reyner Banham, in his essay “A Black Box”, writes of the unspoken assumptions of the architectural profession. There is a whole series of unwritten assumptions about what architecture is, most tellingly revealed by the thought, “I know architecture when I see it.” Nikolaus Pevsner’s snooty comment that a bicycle shed isn’t architecture (“a piece of academic snobbery that can only offend a committed cyclist like myself,” writes Banham, involving “a supposition about sheds that is so sweeping as to be almost racist” (1990: 23)) belongs to this class of statement. We should be rigorously suspicious of those who claim that the detection of architecture requires a priestly faculty, and of the uncriticised assumptions buried in professional common sense. *Tensions* is noteworthy for the attention it directs to the question: what do architects do? Architecture should not be what Banham accuses it of being: “the exercise of an arcane and privileged aesthetic code” (25). Demystifying architectural process is not a threat to architectural autonomy, but an opportunity to make explicit the rich and tense operations necessary to the fabrication of our shared space.



Divya Purusotham - long section



Joseph Crowe - model (Photo by Sou Muy Ly)

References

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