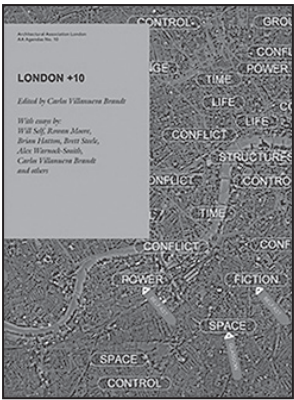


Reviews



London +10 (Architectural Association Agenda 10) 2010
Reviewed by Brendan D. Moran

Larger cities and metropolitan regions constitute richly layered environments, serving many purposes and fostering various cultures and subcultures simultaneously. Within these environs, new aural and televisual accessibility to both public and private realms have lately complicated the psycho-geographic parameters of contemporary urban life. In the process, practices involving traditional social relations dependent upon space and place are being transformed, as in the case of smart phone applications

like Brazil's Dengue Torpedo and London's Urban Green Line.¹ For architectural educators, developments like these influence the manner in which fledgling designers are trained to negotiate the chaotic realm of social practices (both professional and not) to be found at work in today's heterogeneous territorial expanses, from the urban to the exurban, as well as in-between and beyond. In particular, questions of how the "urban" inflects the "architectural" (and vice versa), as terms specifying distinct scalar or intellectual qualities of spaces and environs, are again (as in the 1960s) newly important, largely because new digital realities have complicated

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any clear distinction between them. What contemporary means are available for assisting future architects to become conversant and adept with the precise forces that alter and control our primarily urban planet? And what sorts of secrets yet might be revealed by having architecture students investigate the DNA of cities in search of the penumbras that render such forces visible? At the Architectural Association in London, Diploma Unit 10 (DU10) has been devoting sustained attention to these matters for nearly half a century. A new publication about its recent activities, *London +10*, portrays the unit as advocating an aggressive agenda for using the eponymous city as a laboratory for quasi-scientific study on the part of its students, and in the process proves that the recent dilemmas just noted have long been its primary domain. While the results are decidedly mixed, it is clear the endeavours detailed present exciting possibilities bristling with compelling implications that extend far beyond design education proper.

London +10 is a welcome addition to the literature available on design instruction and its pedagogical aims, as well as a testament to the innovative nature of the AA's system of independent Diploma Units.² The book is framed by a most persuasive gambit: London is at least ten cities layered into one. The volume refreshingly posits that the last two decades of socio-economic upheaval and development in the city have only exacerbated the complexity of distinct and varied forces shaping public space and urban environs. Compiled into one thick (dare I say *urban*) package, the volume consists of thirty-eight student projects arranged in ten thematic sections, accompanied by six framing essays by noteworthy educators, critics, and writers (even one novelist), as well as maps, tables, and timelines that trace the teaching unit's scope and development over time. The ten in the title turns out to be a kind of pun or rise framing the collection: it is the tenth volume in the Architectural Association's *AA Agendas* series; it constitutes a portrait and history of sorts of Diploma Unit 10 over the last two decades; and ten themes—*conflict, control, exchange, fiction, groups, life, power, space, structures, and time*—serve to didactically explicate the particular logics of its strategic pedagogical mission.

The bulky middle section of the book, entitled "Expanding the Themes," encompasses the selection of design projects generated since 1989. They are further framed by short essays by unit graduates devoted to various subthemes found lurking within the ten chosen

rubrics. This illustrated centre is framed fore and aft by un-illustrated texts: in the front, the context of millennial London is fleshed out by novelist Will Self's semi-autobiographical travelogue focusing on recent social changes, as well as architectural historian Rowan Moore's compendium of the ten most important architectural events from the last two decades (the development of Canary Wharf, Sir Norman Foster's global practice, and the upcoming 2012 Olympics, to name only three). At the back are four essays—two by DU10's current director and volume editor Carlos Villanueva Brandt, one by former Unit student Alex Warnock-Smith, and one by historian/critic Brian Hatton—that augment the introductory contextualization with other sorts of frameworks. Hatton's "Another Alternative London: NATØ's London" chronicles how the early pedagogical agenda initiated by DU10 founder Bernard Tschumi in the 1970s transmogrified over the next decade into numerous extravagant installations mounted by the design collective Narrative Architecture Today, led by (among others) subsequent DU10 director Nigel Coates. Warnock-Smith's "Direct Projects: An Insider's View," the most compelling contribution to the volume, uses a first-person narrative to question what lessons the Unit might actually have inculcated in its participants, thereby rendering them subsequently available for whatever endeavours graduates have undertaken since. Brandt's essays close out the volume, laying out his pedagogical methods and missions in the first and, in the short three-page manifesto that follows, theorizing the unit's current modus operandi, "direct urbanism," a term first coined in the unit's 2005–06 prospectus.

Brandt's basic claim for this pedagogy is two-fold: that it treats "methods of engagement" within the city (and in relation to urbanity in general) as the grounds for an experimental, situated form of design activity; and that direct urbanism is the amorphous practice constituted by such engaged explorations, focused more directly on real-life matters rather than on disciplinary specificity. In the all-too-brief polemic, the author locates his interest in the relationship of the urban to the architectural by asking whether we can "internaliz[e] urbanism and externaliz[e] architecture," i.e. apply urban systems thinking to design while at the same time abandoning any lurking fixation on object buildings.³ Citing institutions that employ direct strategies to achieve dynamic interventions in London, such as Meals on Wheels and the recent congestion charge for operating motor vehicles in central London, Brandt

proposes that designers can emulate the tactics adopted by non-design initiatives, thereby affecting the city directly through means beyond conventional urban design. Doing so depends, however, upon getting the students to understand the interactions of two distinct types of urban specifics, namely "situations" and "architectural and/or urban structures."⁴ Towards these ends, the unit's pedagogy requires the student, over the course of their two-year diploma studies, to go out into the city beyond the AA and familiarize themselves with a locale and its multiple, complex and quantifiable variables—diverse stakeholders, infrastructural assets and liabilities, entrenched social dynamics, existing exchange mechanisms, etc. This excursion is mandated in order that students come to design a project by proposing a form of calculus involving the dependency of these myriad parameters upon physical forms, i.e., the aforementioned "structures." Precisely because it in fact constitutes a meta-practice—a pedagogical lesson that generates a platform capable of emboldening students to imagine a personalized mode of practice as the very core of their identity as a designer—direct urbanism clearly exceeds what one might consider a training in the architectural. In short, DU10's method of instruction relies on what could be termed a meta-physics of urban practice; or, rather, an emphasis on practices rather than forms as the very grounds for invention on the part of the designer.

Brandt's pedagogy grows out of earlier activities in Diploma Unit 10, especially the concern (under Tschumi) with the relation of architectural forms to "events," i.e., the specificity of distinct programs. It has a more ambivalent relationship, however, to the Coates era, when an interest in the theatrical narrativization of spatial conditions (in particular those of punk London) replaced earlier concerns. Under Brandt's stewardship since the late 1980s, attention has shifted away from this toward a meta-discursive understanding of practice, in which the Situationist *derive* has become the paradigmatic experience through which students study the nested complexity of urban systems. Brandt's extrapolation of earlier dynamics asks students to generate new formulas for imagining the design project as a constantly changing confluence of parameters, determined less by formal logics than by what he refers to as "real contexts[...]" between the political and the everyday.⁵ Such explorations, occurring just within—or just beyond—the control of one creative individual, leverage experimentation en route to expertise, promoting proficiency



Carlos Villanueva, *Timber Fiber Factory*, Isle of Man, London (perspectives). Student project, Diploma Unit 10, 1982. Giant Sized Baby Town, under direction Nigel Coates.

in both design as well as the intricacies of urban life. A fluid yet palpable duality results from this tactic, ultimately pitting static "structure" against lively "situation" within a reconfigured network of social, economic, political and technological forces. With this pedagogy, then, Brandt in effect is explicating—like many thinkers and pedagogues before him—the terms of a productive, creative schizophrenia.

This dialogical shading is most compelling for being encapsulated simultaneously in the content of the book and in its specific form, especially the book's central section. There the themes are fleshed out in short texts on various sub-themes (for example, within the theme *control*, the subthemes are systems, rules and order), written by some of the very students whose projects "illustrate" the larger themes. In sequence, one first reads these musings and then views the design work (replete with very brief descriptions, all written by Brandt) that gave birth to the subsequent reflections. In classic chicken/egg fashion, one can ask whether the designs flesh out the descriptive provocations, or, instead, if the specifics of a discursive unfolding enrich and enliven the work's representational rigor and rather clinical beauty. Clearly both are occurring simultaneously as one proceeds through the ten themes, as through an education or a life; and it is the frisson between them that animates this portion of the publication. But as Tschumi wrote in a precursor to this volume, the 1983 exhibition catalogue *The Discourse of Events* (devoted to earlier Unit 10 student work), "[p]ublishing student projects makes sense only if the projects rise beyond the documentary quality generally offered by such publications and place themselves historically."⁶ Here, it is less the projects that suggest any historical consciousness than the overwhelming implication that a vital contemporary pedagogical project lies in locating design innovation within larger understandings of professional and social practice.

However, the accompanying shift in emphasis—from envisioning interventions to imagining potential practices—comes at the cost of a demotion of graphic representation, reflected in the volume's overwhelmingly high text-to-image ratio. This aspect of the volume confronts the reader with a quandary as to whether this experiment proves a success or failure. While I think the former is clearly the case, the reader has to take the writers' and editors' word for it. Design drawings in *London +10*, even though accompanied by Brandt's project summaries, are not given central importance, as in the earlier DU10 publication; instead, they are wrapped by retroactive thematization, introductory and concluding texts, and in

particular Brandt's theorization of his pedagogy's larger merit, all un-illustrated texts. Following the texts on sub-themes with a series of curated two-page spreads—one per design proposal, woefully inadequate for conveying any but the faintest glimmer of the project's general flavour—produces a retroactive counterpoint that only suggests rather than convinces this reader that there are potential experiential benefits at stake at the level of design.⁷ As a database, with full inclusion of *all* materials for each project depicted, the volume might have become a user's manual for engaged education in general, providing evidence of the interaction of numerous disciplines within the realm of the urban and the architectural; as it is, the volume only hints at what amounts to an updating of Paulo Friere's critical pedagogy, one potentially capable of liberating the urban from fossilization within discourses of events, spaces and places—and perhaps, even the architectural.⁸ In short, the desire to understand the specifically architectural applications of "direct urbanism" are whetted but somewhat squelched by the book.

The overall effect suggests that if direct urbanism enables or initiates new productive associations within an existing, complex network of connections it is ipso facto valuable, but this might be beside the point when it prevents certain overarching logics from being recognized, i.e., a parametric understanding of an expanded (non-disciplinary) urban field. Brandt intimates as much in his essay on the vagaries of method, remarking that "context is not the be-all-and-end-all of the work," and that students are to proceed with the intent of "expanding the variables of context beyond the existing social, political, economic and cultural limitations," one might even add beyond the context of design and design education proper.⁹ Such pedagogy can have a specifically architectural aspiration, or not—it might even prove most architecturally provocative, nay even successful, precisely when it dispenses with any a priori understandings of the architectural. Unfortunately, the volume doesn't come down either way on this possibility, and it easily could have.

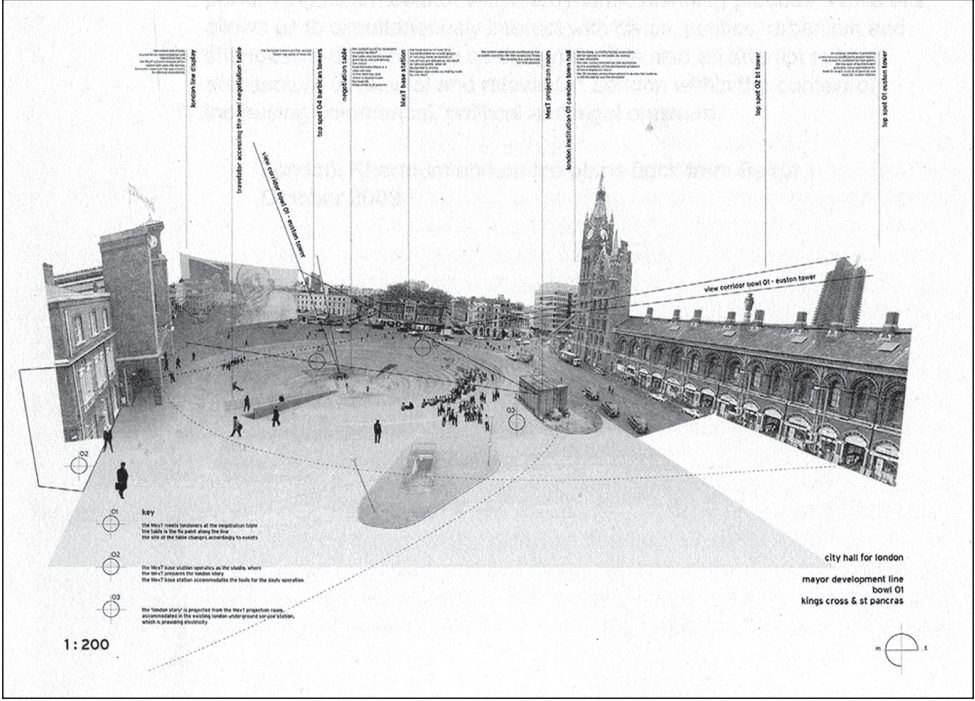
This potential versatility of deployment, however, frames a perplexing dilemma found in the task of training designers: toward what particular (political) ends can the architect's practices be applied? Addressing this, however, would probably require a more sustained investigation of the very question of the real—or what Brandt refers to as "real life." Two essays in particular offer insights toward these ends: Warnock-Smith's autobiographical, worm's-eye view of the pedagogical experiment that is DU10; and Edmund Fowles'

piece "Interchange," from the *exchange* theme section. Both elucidate important dynamics raised by Brandt's construct of direct urbanism, namely, in what ways does its understanding of architecture's relationship to the city, distinct as it is from those of Le Corbusier, Team X members, Aldo Rossi, Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, Rem Koolhaas, Tschumi and others, offer a means for the student to formulate a future, viable form of practice?

Describing the experience as overwhelmingly painful, Warnock-Smith claims his educational transformation at the AA boiled down to learning the schism between "[d]irect experiments in the city, and analytic experiments in the studio."¹⁰ Thus, after urban immersion and inhabitation, observation of the site and subsequent familiarization with the concerns of local stakeholders and potential topics worthy of investigation, the student frames a situation to ameliorate through architectural design. Such a way of working necessitates the student turn outward, beyond architecture, for some kind of expertise or set of knowledges that would assist her in making sense of the situations she has experienced. It is at this point that "action" takes on a new meaning, beyond the normative shift from analysis to synthesis involved in more traditional design exercises. The author notes the importance of what he calls "working drawings" of the area under examination, which frame the challenge of representing social conditions and activities, the lives lived and struggles waged in an urban locale.¹¹ As described by Warnock-Smith (and Brandt), such accessible technical devices become forceful elocutions of the potential of networked knowledge to empower creative imaginations. I would argue this way of working amounts to a kind of non-digital parametricism, one that eschews coding and computer programming—while *deploying* computer models—to focus instead on those "identified social, political, economic and interactive variables that constitute the site."¹² Such an interpretation of Brandt's DU10 pedagogy suggests it clearly has applications beyond the limited scope of architectural or design education, due to being attuned to the newly revised parameters of social activities and dynamic forces in an increasingly digitally enhanced milieu.

Fitting hand in hand with Warnock-Smith's text, Fowles' essay—on the difficulties of grasping the overall network of exchanges taking place within the physical structures that make up the city—offers a counterpoint to it. By emblematically citing Transport for London's 2002 *Interchange Plan* as a document endemic of the challenge facing design

Henrik Rothe and Ole Scheeren, *NextT-Project for Greater London Council*, Westminster, London (perspective). Collaborative student project, Diploma Unit 10, 2000.



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practices today, Fowles claims its snappy catch phrase—“Making London simple”—reveals the conundrum at the heart of training designers to act within a parametric understanding of contemporary urban space. He argues that if any representation or design strives to cut through the complexity of political, social, economic, ecological, and infrastructural concerns, it must possess accuracy while simultaneously simplifying an unbelievably complex situation, furthermore rising to the occasion of its own generation to create something iconic, symbolic and readily apprehensible. There is an inherent level of complexity to be found when taking into consideration multifarious forces—say, different constituencies and communities competing for the same limited services, or the cohabitation of stakeholders with different interests within a certain public realm—over and above just modeling found parameters as opposed to newly desired ones. The scale and character of actual encounters, exchanges and events tend to get overlooked, or at least downplayed, in the face of ever increasing amounts of quantifiable descriptive information. When designers accept the challenge of compensating for this tendency, they face a nearly insurmountable communicative quandary: how to be representative without being reductive? Fowles thus argues, surprisingly, *against* simplification as a design intention. Taking food distribution and exchange (retail, not wholesale) in the East London area of Hackney as a case study for testing the instrumentality of “direct urbanism,” his included design proposal is based on the premise that there is an alternative “to the oversimplification of interchanges,” namely layering the complexity of urban life onto city spaces at every scale: urban, architectural, *and* infinitesimal. Unfortunately, these two clearly articulated insights—the importance of computer modeling as the key parametric representation of the urban, and the necessity of imaginative and communicative layering in their employment toward determinate ends by designers—are not so well framed by the volume’s visuals. Over the years, Brandt’s students have taken

increasingly to generating 3D CAD models of their specific sites, incorporating coded information within them; yet as published, the output of these models are a bit off-putting in their digital austerity, taking on a technocratic gleam that renders them often more opaque than communicative.¹⁴ While no doubt they enabled the designers to develop their own working methods—proposing an addition to an existing structure, demolishing and reconstituting it instead, or retrofitting another—their potential as communicative images accessible to any but the most technocratically minded urban denizen (government official? community activist? average citizen? protestor?) remains unclear. Perhaps there is a silver lining here, intimated by Warnock-Smith: the particular “analogous” linkages that can ultimately serve to unite the student’s methodical command of systematicity with an unrelated (and unexpected) desire or outcome, and in the process fathom new representational horizons. His DU10 project “Urban Integration System” seeks to render the immigration system more humane while also generating a more integrated public realm, by redesigning the recently privatized housing complex Collingwood Estate in London’s Tower Hamlets as an “Integration Centre” that locates services for particular asylum seekers within an immigrant community of similar cultural background. In projects like this, the surrealism inherent in the unit’s early Situationist inspiration plays a strong role. Although it is hard to judge from the imagery included, the very act of depicting such an aspiration spatially in and of itself begins a process whereby it can participate in the rearranging and improvement of those urban environs where such activity currently plays out. At the same time, this begs the question—or, rather, postpones resolution—of the political valence made available by doing so, i.e. how do the designer’s nascent historical imaginations, generative of and by new associations, in turn get deployed, so as to generate effects in the so-called “real” world that can be

predicted and controlled? In this regard, DU10’s current direction is at least a minor success; for many of the unit’s graduates have gone on to engage in what Warnock-Smith describes as a variety of “real[z]ed interventions, planning applications and consultancy work.”¹⁴ Two directions seem to predominate: one tending toward the realization of architectural projects that rely on dispersed or non-traditional spatial programming to facilitate new public stagings of interaction; and another that questions the very limits of architecture in relation to contemporary urban spatial practices. An example of the former is Ole Scheeren, who completed a collaborative project (with Henrik Rothe) in DU10 that dispersed the various spatial, infrastructural and mediatic components of offices for the Greater London Authority along a linear path weaving through the city. For a while Scheeren was a partner at OMA, importantly shaping that firm’s Beijing project for CCTV (as well as exhibits about it), and recently he has opened his own firm. Two other grads, Eyal Weizman and Markus Miessen, exemplify the latter direction. Following his time at the AA, Weizman completed an interdisciplinary PhD that focused on the role played by architecture within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which he has reconfigured into a series of publications and exhibitions that challenge the assumption that architecture is ever truly autonomous of larger political machinations. He now runs the new Centre for Research Architecture at Goldsmiths College, University of London, which grounds architectural research in a non-professional context and aims “to open up the discipline and praxis of ‘architecture’—understood as the production of rarefied buildings and urban structures—into a shifting network of ‘spatial practices’ that includes various other forms of intervention.”¹⁵ Miessen is following in Weizman’s footsteps, pursuing his own doctorate in this program while also running nOffice (with Magnus Nilsson and Ralf Pflugfelder), whose projects have included a series of temporary meeting/working space interventions, among them multiple

efforts for the annual Performa Arts conferences and the “On-Site” Hub at the 2011 Gwangju Biennale in South Korea. In such pursuits, an attention to the staging of encounters and the intermixing of constituencies dominates the work, suggesting that the legacy of DU10 is present, but not limiting. Clearly, DU10 shifts pedagogical emphasis from inculcating a pre-ordained set of techniques and design methods, focusing it instead on what Francesca Hughes has termed the architect’s necessary task of “reconstructing her practice.”¹⁶ This (re)construction of practice, however, depends upon assumptions of a kind of realist transparency, one that is instrumentally essential for the varieties of outcomes envisioned by “direct urbanism.” Concluding his essay on method, Brandt claims the chosen themes “describe the live reality of the city, the real city, the real London.”¹⁷ I would contend that they do not quite do so, as there is no one “reality” capable of being described. In Brandt’s turn of phrase, however, is a hint at what underlies the unit’s reliance on computer simulations, the primary tools for producing Warnock-Smith’s “working drawings.” Such parametric understandings of situations, structures, organisms or even practices are, by and large, an extremely recent innovation. Is not their eerie contemporaneity, however, or their timely unheimlich effect, precisely the reflection of not one model of reality but many—as well as of new subjects who can juggle all of them at once? Must such a new subject need to possess the acumen to choose between them, above and beyond who might have the power to realize them? By tweaking parameters, myriad potential tomorrows appear in an instant, in the process creating a vast family of related “ghost” realities, as well as figures who can literally see these ghosts. The shadowy simulacra of the computer model, be it BIM, AutoCad, or Rhino, is of course today’s new reality within design professions and the world at large; negotiating the interface between them will determine how much better (or not) this future world will be than the one it supersedes. While together these shadows

simulate a living future—unexplored potentials, unrealized hopes and desires, but also fears and worries about the nature of complexities yet-to-come—they also raise new questions about how to live, and how design might (yet) live. In much the same manner, *London + 10* generates a dialogical pulse between (in)determinate method and (im)probable

application. The construct of direct urbanism simultaneously emphasizes both the exact realities of a newly parametric urban territory and the far more ethereal machinations of a ghost in that particular machine. For this achievement alone, it might well yield unexpected lessons for students and teachers alike, no matter their specialization. X

Notes

1. Dengue Torpedo, a cell phone application developed by the Social Apps Lab at University of California Berkeley’s Center for Information Technology Research in the Interest of Society, allows citizens to publicize sites of stagnant water within São Paolo by using crowdsourcing capabilities. Urban Green Line, a social networking organization devoted to gardens and parks in London, is a website and mobile app-supported initiative started by students from Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design.
2. Diploma study in Great Britain, as the second component in the education of a professional architect, entails advanced design work and is similar but not precisely analogous to the options studio or thesis studies that follow core curriculum in most North American programs. At the AA, diploma units have a long-term semi-autonomy, a situation that allows for sustained pedagogical experimentation not commonly found in analogous North American contexts. Figures who have taught Diploma Units at the AA and garnered a sizable reputation (even notoriety) while doing so include Elia Zengelis and Rem Koolhaas, Zaha Hadid, Leon Krier, Peter Smithson, Cedric Price, and Daniel Libeskind, among others. For a discussion of the formation of the current AA unit system out of earlier pedagogical practices, see Irene Sunwoo, “From the ‘Well-laid Table’ to the ‘Market Place’: The Architectural Association Unit System,” *JAE* 67, no.2 (March 2012): 24-41.
3. Carlos Villanueva Brandt, ed., *London +10* (London: The Architectural Association, 2010), 289.
4. Ibid, 281.
5. Ibid, 281.
6. Bernard Tschumi, “Spaces and Events,” *The Discourse of Events*, ed. Nigel Coates (London: Architectural Association, 1983), 6.
7. They constitute less than ten percent of DU10’s production over the period covered!
8. I am referring here to such noteworthy activist publications as his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) and *Education for Critical Consciousness* (1973), with their interest in the pioneering pedagogical philosophies of John Dewey and others.
9. Brandt, *London*, 282.
10. Ibid, 270.
11. One is reminded of the myriad “immutable mobiles” Bruno Latour identifies as the harbingers of modernity, which emerged immediately before the Enlightenment, in particular maps, printed books and periodicals. See Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).
12. Brandt, *London*, 271.
13. Although there are probably many ways now to produce such “parametric” models, the reliance on extrusion as a formal technique in a large quantity of the representations depicted in the book suggests that the straightforwardness of protocols found in popular modeling software like SketchUp are to a certain extent exploited within the studio’s work. However, this may also merely be a register of a certain temporal unfolding, in which the limitations of software are being pushed by pedagogical desires.
14. Brandt, *London*, 274.
15. “Postgraduate Studies, Visual Culture,” 8 (Research Architecture booklet available at <http://www.gold.ac.uk/architecture/>, accessed 06/15/12). Located within the postgraduate Visual Cultures division, the Centre offers MA, M.Phil and PhD degrees.
16. Francesca Hughes, *The Architect: Reconstructing Her Practice* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998).
17. Brandt, *London*, 287.

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