

A ROYAL GITTERN AT THE BRITISH MUSEUM

ENGLISH 1280 - 1330, ROOM 42

NÍALL MCLAUGHLIN

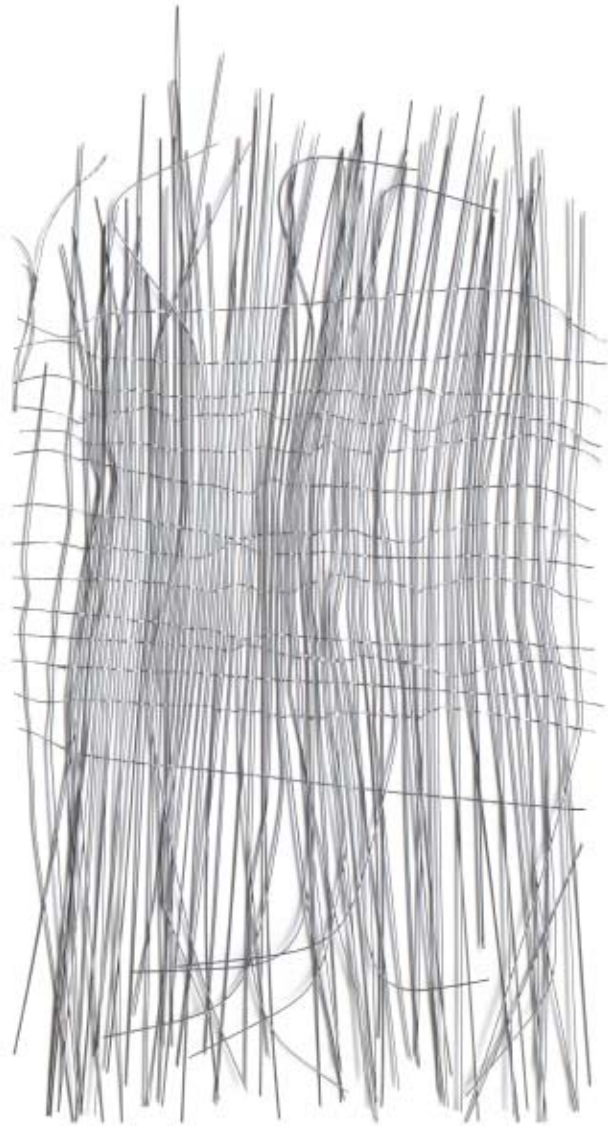
A ROYAL GITTERN AT THE BRITISH MUSEUM

NÍALL MCLAUGHLIN

I will write about a building that I have dreamt of but never built. Its properties have been forming in my mind for many years. It relates to my experience of living and working in Britain.

During my first year in London I spent many Sundays exploring the British Museum. I became attached to one artefact in particular. I have tried, without success, to draw it. It is a gittern, which is a kind of early guitar. The surface of the sounding box is very closely inscribed with a delicate filigree of dense foliage. If you look closely, you can make out plump acorns among the leaves, then pigs eating them at the foot of the tree. A man with a pole shakes the branches to drop the nuts for the pigs. Someone is chasing a rabbit through the thicket. The man, the rabbit and an arrow - flying from his bow - are all held within a dense maze of branches. These things are so intertwined that it takes your eye some time to distinguish detail in the continuous, enfolded fabric of leaves. If you follow the incidents across the carved surface, you eventually arrive back at the man with the acorns and the pigs. It is a world that unfolds and repeats endlessly.

As if by design, or happy coincidence, the object in the case next to it is an astrolabe. The date of its manufacture is not much later than the gittern, but it seems to occupy another world. Here is a device that used the elevation of stars relative to the horizon to objectively plot man's position on the surface of the earth. You know where you are. This was the beginning of the modern world. This perception of the horizon as an objective datum altered everything. It lifted us off the dense, intertwined face of the world and asked us to



Competition
sketch model

NMLA
2002



Albrecht
Altdorfer

*St. George &
the Dragon*

see ourselves as separate from it. In some ways, it was a loss of innocence as profound as *The Fall*.

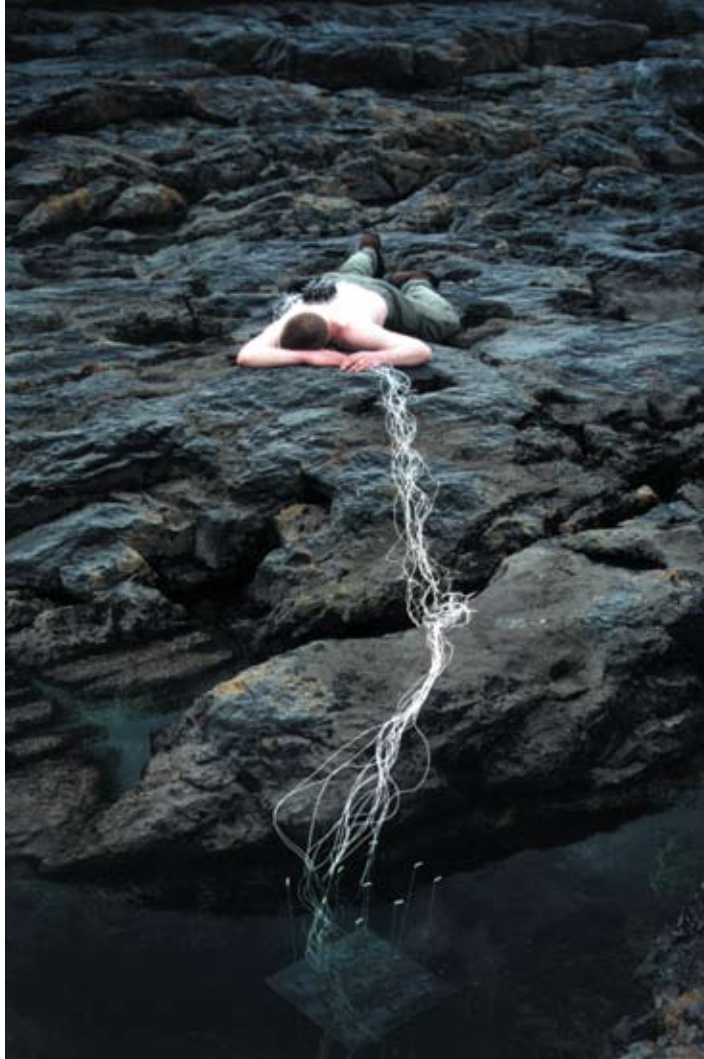
In 1510, Albrecht Altdorfer was painting in Regensburg on the Danube. In trying to create a specific northern identity for German painting, challenged by the great power of the Italian City States, he made the forest his subject. *St. George and the Dragon* is a painting in which the whole space of the page is engulfed in a mass of minutely observed foliage. The two protagonists are dwarfed by the profusion of growth. One tiny window opens in the foliage to show a mountain and sky. It is the only thing to give spatial depth to the surface of the painting. I am interested in Altdorfer's deliberate denial of perspectival devices in his attempt to create a specifically Northern European identity for the work. Here he suggests, in the woodland, the world is a dense unfolding thicket where pattern and line are more telling than surface or placement in space.

| 02 |

I am not, like William Morris, sentimental about a medieval idyll - a better age in the past. Nor am I particularly interested in the undoubted craftsmanship of the pieces I have described. I am really interested in the spatial properties of these works and what kind of world they might suggest. I will call them thickets, and suggest that the spatial property they have is that of immersion; the sense that the space we inhabit is a continuous dense weave without edges.

I began to think about architecture of line, where boundaries are no longer described by enclosing surfaces, but are intuited somewhere in an enveloping matrix of interconnected networks. It is almost blasé to say that our increasingly linked world is thicket-like.

It was possible to develop this thinking through some of my teaching work with Unit 17 at the Bartlett School of Architecture. Working with my colleagues Philip Tabor and Yeoryia Manolopoulou, we teased-



Guy Dickinson
*Arran
installation*

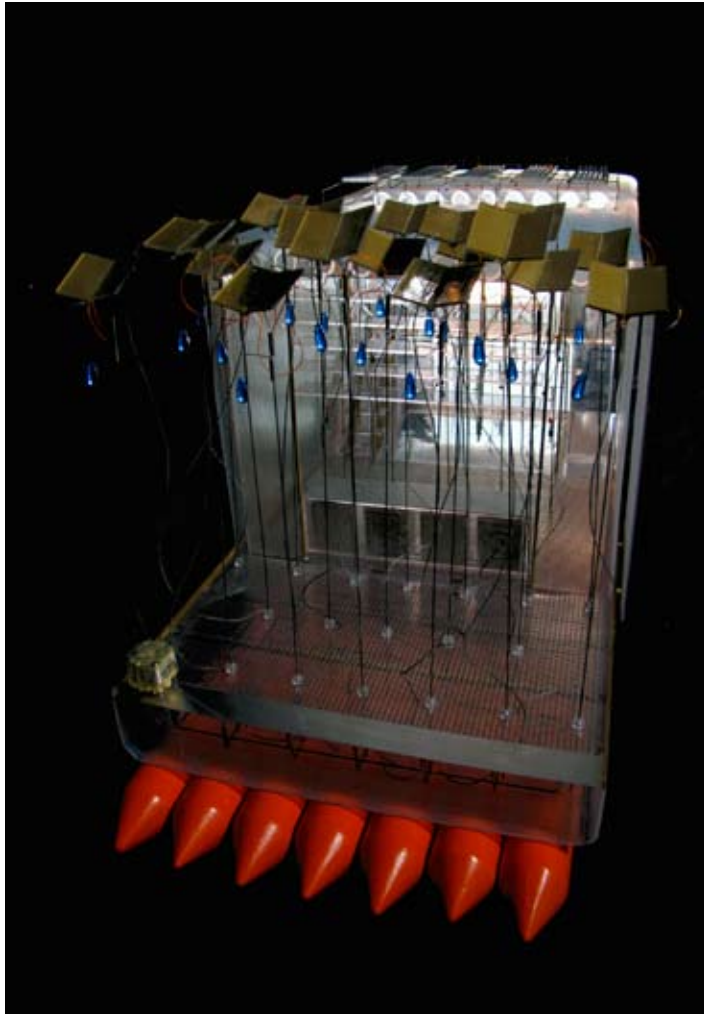
out some of the possibilities related to thickets. An experimental teaching environment is suitable for developing ideas such as these. I don't mean to be facile when I say that it is easier to think about architecture of line when you are not obliged to keep the weather out. One project we set for students was a visit to the island of Aran in Gallway Bay to make working pieces that they would place in the landscape. I will discuss two of them here.

Guy Dickinson made a patch for his back, gridded with tiny needles. Each one was electronically connected to a matrix of sensors on the rocky inter-tidal shore. The intermittent fragile activity of the rock pools was transmitted into a tiny tattooing on his back. His own posture (remembering a powerful moment in Tarkovsky's *Stalker*) was entirely recumbent on the freezing rocks. The piece was both vicious and tender.

Siobhan Sexton made a photosensitive object that she installed in the roof of a cave on the Atlantic-facing shore. Low sunlight entered the cave and reflected off rock pools to scatter occasional fragments of wavering light onto the ceiling of the cave. The sensor in a crack on the roof patiently harvested this light. When enough energy had been gathered, it was automatically discharged by triggering the piece to play back one recorded word. This word was the name of a local family whose last surviving member had recently emigrated. This tiny object was left in place and, very occasionally, the name is pronounced against the thunder of the sea.

These pieces suggest that it is possible for technology to act in the environment in new ways. It is not placed in opposition to the natural world; rather the relationship is one of interdependence. Machines can deal with histories and the identity of place. They can exist within natural systems and patterns of inhabitation.

Silke Vosskoetter made an artificial oasis in the Western Desert of



Houseboat

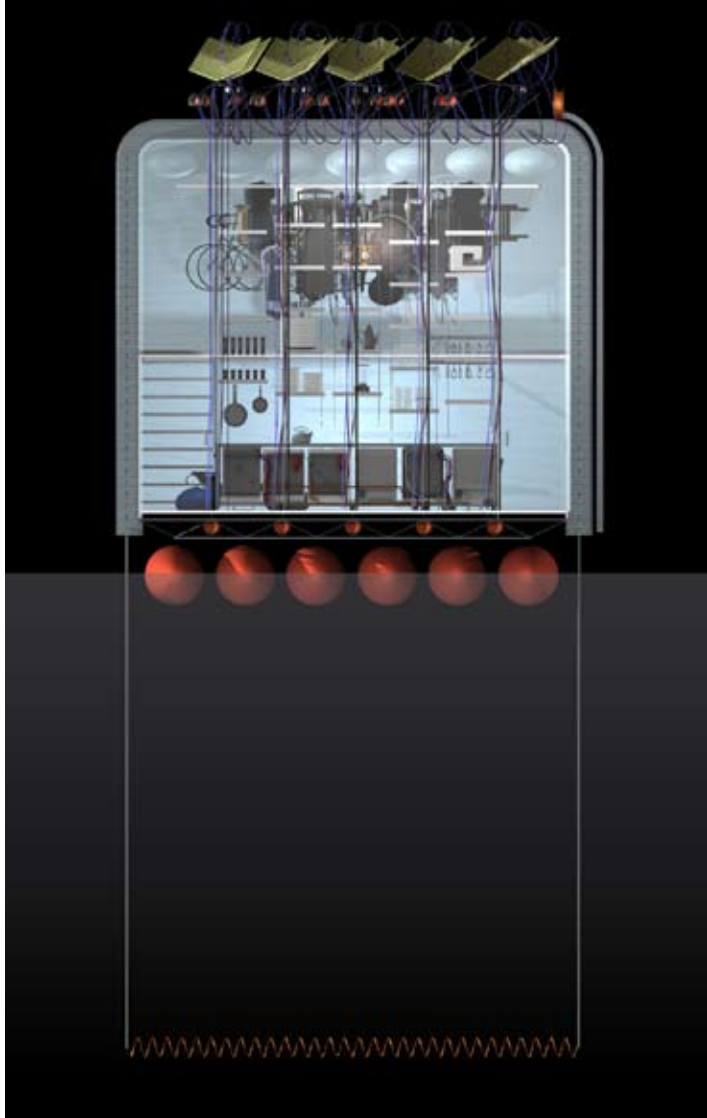
*Exhibition
model*

Morocco. A loose matrix of poles supports an array of solar panels. Energy gathered during the day is used to chill the panels at night. The cool panels precipitate moisture from the air coming off the Atlantic. The condensation is directed down into collection bags. This desert piece provides shade and water and an escape from the open sand. This was something on the scale of a building. It used the interweaving of lines to make a space in this great empty landscape. It might be like hiding in a hedge. Some of the models reminded me of paintings by Cy Twombly; dense structured scribbles suggesting space.

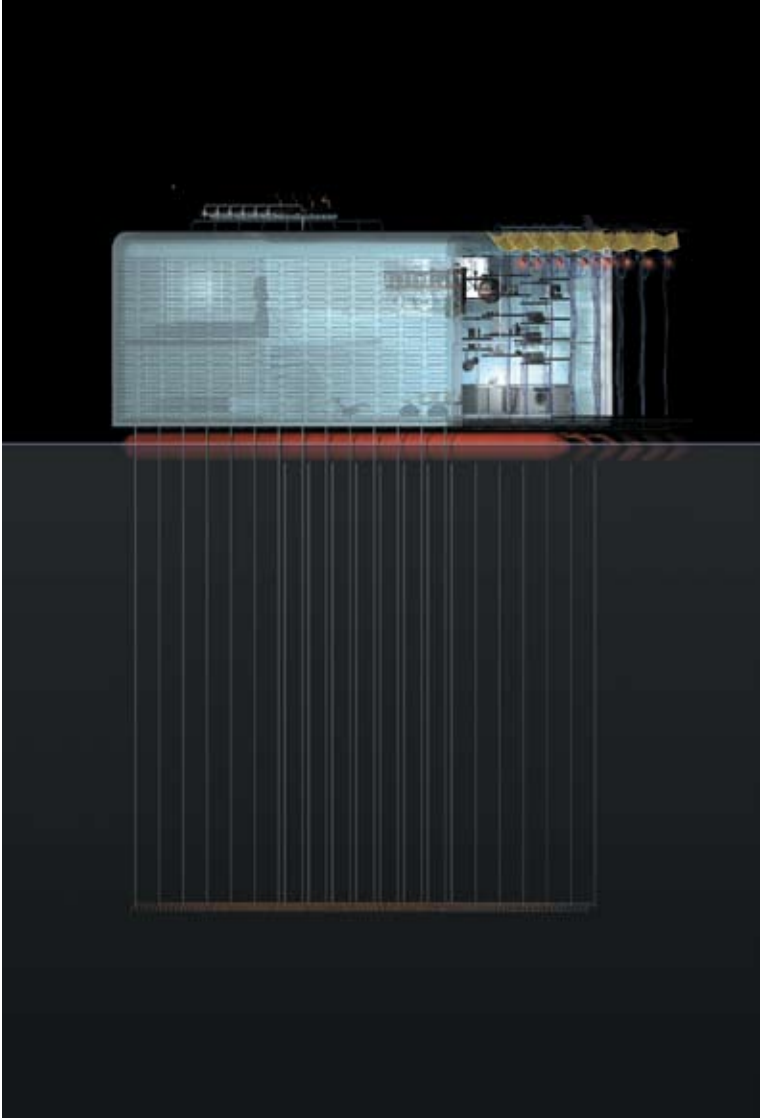
| 04 |

Later on, Silke worked with us in the practice and we designed a houseboat. Here, for the first time, we tried to resolve the problem of how to keep weather out of a building without surfaces. We thought of the external wall as an assembly of woven layers, some would form the structural shell, others the inner lining, insulation and waterproofing. Differing densities of weave could perform each function. Geometric arrays of clear plastic under floor heating-pipes ran through the walls and were connected to copper coils under the water. This solar powered system was used to moderate the environment of the building by connecting it to the more stable temperature in deeper water.

We started to think about the interior as something different from the usual architect's photo-fantasy. Instead of immaculate empty interiors with strategically placed symbolic items, we considered the architecture of intense clutter. Where everything might be tucked out of sight, we turned the storage inside out. In the tall old Edinburgh tenements, they used to hoist their laundry into hanging racks up in the ceiling. In the houseboat, we had a hanging attic where everything could be put away but visible. You would live within the thick plenitude of your own possessions. I remember a photograph, by Jeff Wall, of a man in an interior, like a spider's nest.



Houseboat
*Front and
side elevation*



Andreas
Gursky

Siemens
factory



His suspended arrays of lights, scraps and possessions make their own space. This intimate, domestic thickness has considerable power, but is often seen as beyond the scope of architectural imagining. There is something bourgeois about this denial.

Anne Enright, writes about childhood memories of pattern:

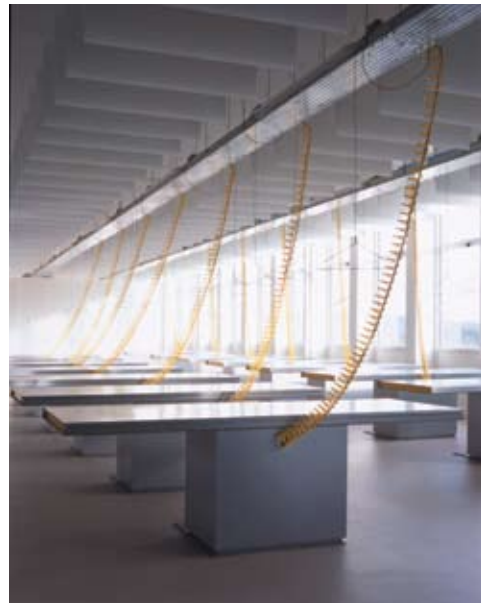
“In my head is the cosy paranoia of an Irish sitting-room: Fifties curtains with an urn full of flowers woven into the net, Sixties leaves scattered all over the carpet, wallpaper from the Seventies embossed in damasked lines, and Sanderson flowers on the Eighties sofa, all of them in different shades of green perhaps, or peach, variations on a theme. All over the country people are looking at their sitting-rooms and seeing, not what they mean, but what other people think they mean, and painting the walls Magnolia Matt, painting over the pleasure and the trap, the fluid geometry that shifts and thickens from carpet to sofa to wall. The multiplication is pathological and easy, it spawns. The Irish sitting room is reproduction itself.”

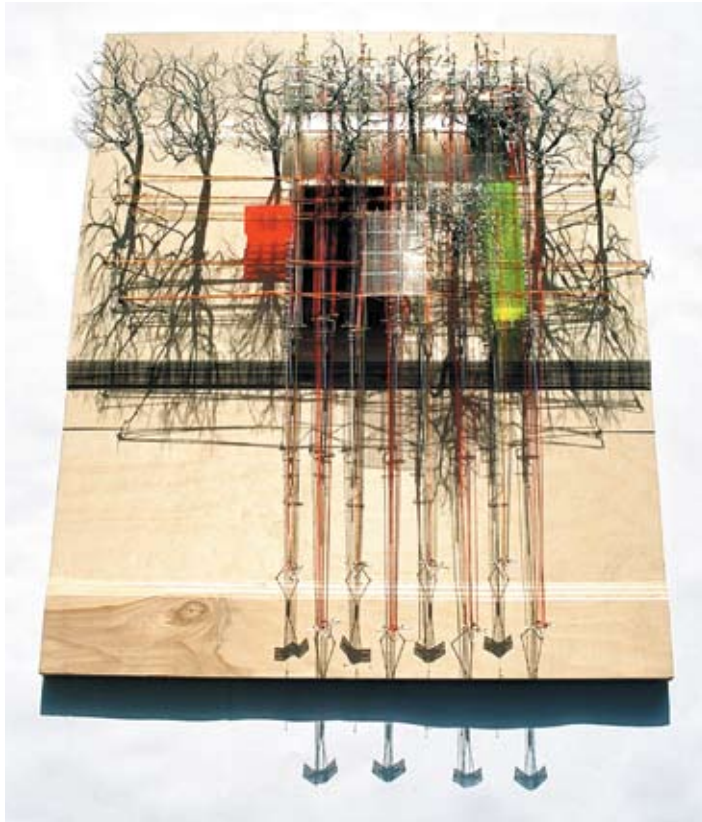
Anne Enright. Diary. LRB. 2 January 1997.

Many ordinary environments, considered beyond architecture, have properties that we would associate with this thickened world. In our studio we collect examples and keep them on a pin board. They operate as partial versions of this building that we haven't built. Andreas Gursky's photograph of the Siemens factory shows a rain shower of tools hanging from the ceiling, suspended on air-lines and cables. The multi-coloured, coded, electrical and data lines fall with unstudied, casual elegance. There is so much of it that it makes a space within which the workers gather at their tasks. For a moment you can see, in this industrial process, a glimmer of Altdorfer's wood. The image was so compelling that we tried to literally build it for the Digital Architecture Studio we designed

Oxford
Brookes

Architecture
studio





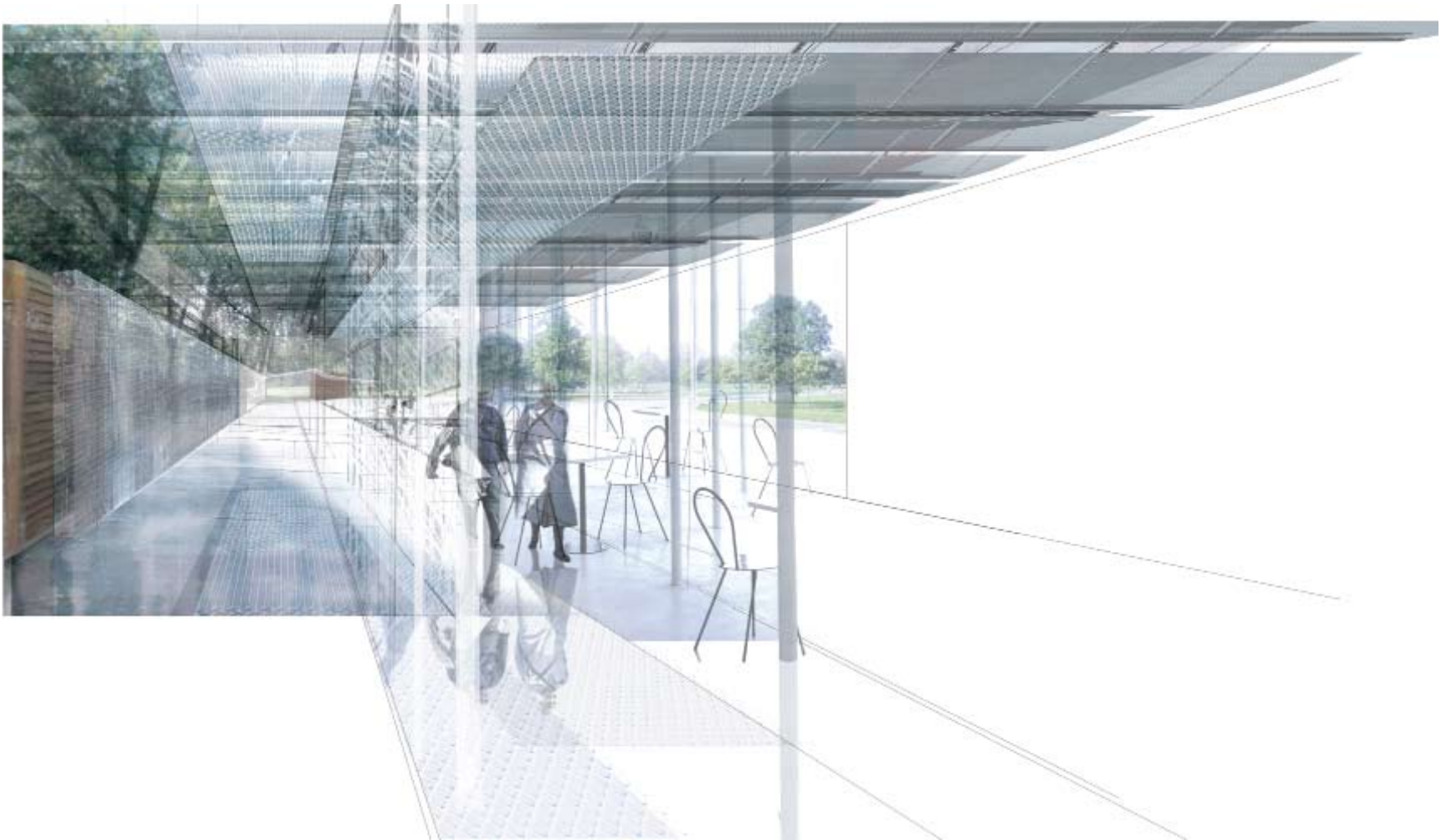
at Oxford Brookes University. A regular cloud of acoustic baffles hangs below the concrete roof and a shower of data lines, power lines, drawing hangars and coat hangars drop through to the desks below.

In two competitions we had the opportunity to literally weave our building between trees. Both are park pavilions. In each case, multiple woven layers and screens enclose the spaces. The trees appear to grow right through the interior, but this is an illusion. The building line wanders in and out to incorporate them. The roof is designed like a tree canopy with layers of gutters, solar shading, north-lights, lay-lights and festooned lighting. In some areas it is dense, while in others it thins out, and occasional lines wander out into the park. The trees and the elements of the buildings cast complex dappled shadows so that the projected lines double the architecture, weaving patterns on the ground.

One pavilion – Finsbury Park in London – is the first building of this kind that we were able to bring through the whole process of design and detailed development to a level of resolution that showed it could be viable. The other – in Preston – did not win the competition. This is a great pity. It was designed like a linen-loom, one that gathers energy from its surroundings. It responded particularly to the rain, because Preston is the wettest town in England. The whole roof was designed to noisily catch and delay the rainwater, sending it along chutes, across surfaces and gushing from gargoyles against windows. The rain becomes our way of animating the building and, like the shadows, becomes a part of the architecture. In this way we began to design the building in time.

The screen has become a favourite device in our search. It is both surface and space. There is pattern, repetition and variation. Screens hold light within themselves, and this can manifest the

Park pavilion,
Preston, UK
*Competition
model*



Finsbury
Park pavilion,
London
*Competition
view*

Bridget Riley

*Rough Study
for Revision
of February
14(B)*



passage of time across the day. Sometimes they seem like clocks.

One screen, in a private house in London, is made from 300 computer-punched A4 sheets of silver-nickel suspended in a staggered array. South light is projected against the back of the screen. The arrangement of the sheets allows light to bounce around between and within each panel. Experiments decided the precise angle of the surfaces within the piece. As the sun's position changes throughout the day and the year the screen reveals a range of luminous conditions, sometimes a glowing icon, sometimes a jagged silhouette.

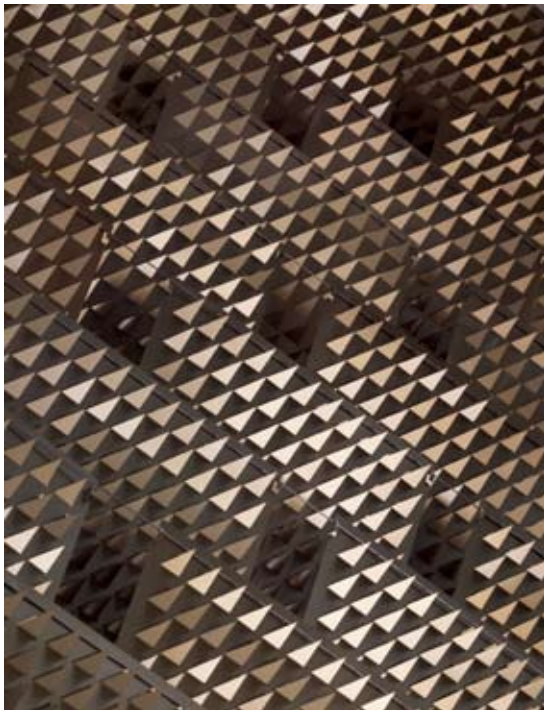
| 09 |

Rough Study for Revision of February 14 (B) is a drawing by Bridget Riley. She is patiently constructing the geometric orchestration of layers within a polychromatic array. The words I use to describe this piece are almost musical because the technique is close to music. I think that she has looked deeply into Paul Klee. He was seeking connections between musical structures and the painted surface. It is the principle of polyphony applied to the use of colour.

We made a coloured screen on the face of a building. The project was for low-cost housing on an eerie site in Silvertown in East London. Derelict industrial buildings are being replaced with a weird combination of IBIS Hotels, conference centres and Noddy houses. This old industrial complex had once created the cheap glory of Victorian manufactured goods – matches, coloured dyes, golden syrup, petroleum, primrose soap and fireworks. This is the home of the pearly kings and queens. Working with the artist Martin Richman we tried to create iridescence. We used radiant light film in staggered layers behind cast glass. By developing minor variations within the geometric array between the layers, we could produce complex effects that varied throughout the day and the

Hanging
chords

*Residential
screen*





Peabody
Trust housing
*Silvertown,
East London*



Banavari and
Muhammad

*Untitled
painting*

year. A stand of Silver Birch in front of the building casts fluttering indigo shadows and captures coloured particles of escaping light. On certain days, when the light is right, a coloured carpet appears briefly on the tarmac surface of the street.

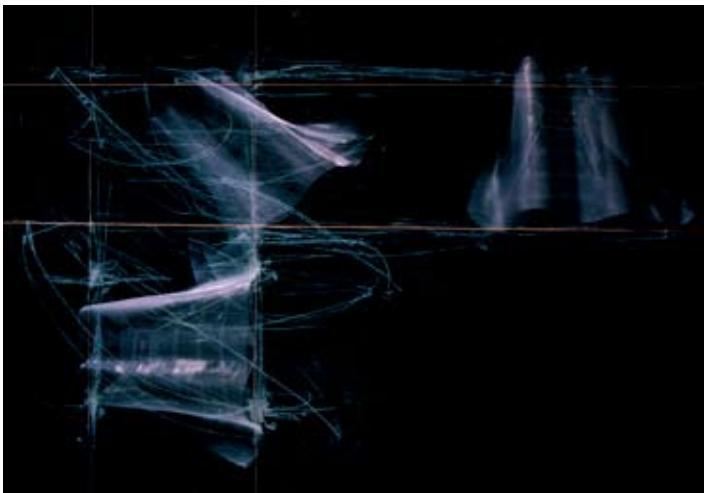
The effect of the running suitors, in Banavari and Muhammad's painting, is electrifying- their fleeting trajectory against the sharp stillness of the earth. Figures are cast against the ground – flowers, creatures, hunters and the hunted. It seems that depiction and representation were at the point where they had just recently lifted off the woven surface of a carpet to become images. Everything seems connected within an intertwined, deeply structured system. The image has neither a centre nor an edge.

Here is a fugitive dream world. One quality the thicket has is that of change. Within the spatial matrix, everything is in flux. This allows me to think of buildings as lacking a stable presence. It is a commonplace of most architectural representation that buildings have one perfect moment of being – sometime between completion and the day the photographs are taken. But the ticket has temporal properties. Connections extend back and forth. A building has no perfect moment of resolution. Its reality is equal in every phase of its conception, making, change and dissolution. The moment of the first sketch and the moment of ruin are equally pressing realities. One implication of this thinking is to challenge the idea of individual authorship. There is little scope for such a stable presence to exist in this fugitive lacework.

These two insights; that the building is unfinishable, and that it is not the work of an individual mind, are liberating for me as an architect. It is possible to imagine my own identity as part of an interconnected network. A building project can draw into itself a thousand threads: uncertain histories, possible futures, collaborations, objections,

Soundscape
preliminary
drawing

Bandstand



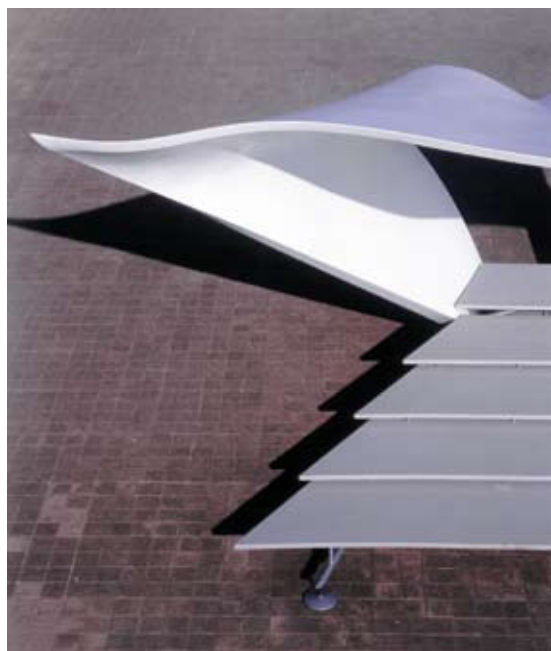
surreal bureaucratic obstacles, microenvironments, revisions, occupation, extensions and unlikely changes of use. The identity that we see at any point in design, construction, inhabitation, alteration and ruin is less stable than it appears.

When we made a seafront bandstand for the De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill, we tried to work with this awareness. The design was carried out as a broad collaboration between local schools. We observed and edited the process. From time to time, we stole a version of the design to manifest it in a fixed image. We concentrated on representing the building, not as an artefact, but as a place where invisible forces find an identity. This naturally included wind, weight and sound, but we also looked at how the occupation of the site would gradually change, like the layout of deckchairs on a breezy day. Michael McHugh, who built the project, took photographs of every stage of the fabrication. For me, it was more beautiful during this period in the workshop than it was when complete. The images taken during design and construction tell us something important about the deeper identity of the piece and, when they were taken, they were the only reality.

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Bandstand

Bexhill, UK



A couple of years ago I was travelling to an interview for a Centre for the Built Environment in Hull. I knew nothing about the place, so I asked the ticket inspector on Hull Trains to tell me what she knew about the town. For an hour she poured out stories. At least some were believable. I repeated the stories at the interview and got the job (I knew so much!). We continued the process by asking everyone the simple question. Why is Hull like it is? What emerged was an imprint of the deep tissue of the place, not as fact but as myth and understanding. We used these stories to design the building. We contacted every significant manufacturer in the town to find if their products could be incorporated into our building. Caravans as rooms, shower trays as paving, beautiful Reckitts' Blue! It is clear

Bandstand
under
construction

*Michael
McHugh's
workshop*



ARC
Hull, UK



that something of the form of the building has the fingerprint of our office, but the important things were made in Hull. In this process we saw our role as architect to be very different to the individual or master maker. We allowed ourselves to think of the architectural studio as a conduit that is intertwined, compromised, reliant, a patient conductor through which latent forces emerge.

We have attempted to develop a specific architecture of line and immersion that could be said to have a thicket-like quality. I don't think that we have come close to achieving a compelling built synthesis of our ideas yet. We understand that the resolution of the ideal in a built project is not as important as the form of understanding that comes from thinking of buildings as time-bound, intertwined and fugitive. We will keep making fragments, feints and trial-pieces. In this sense, my dreamt-of building already exists in an emerging state.