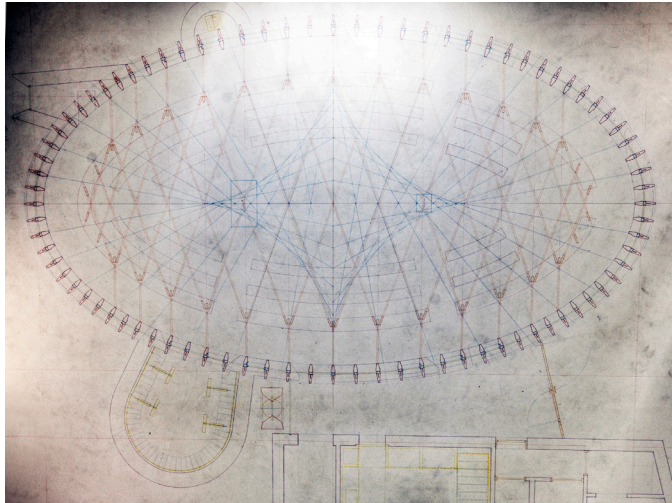


THE TRACING FLOOR
NÍALL MCLAUGHLIN

Timelapse
photograph of
installation

UCD, 18-21.02.11



THE TRACING FLOOR

NÍALL MCLAUGHLIN

iii

Squarings? In the game of marbles, squarings
Were all those anglings, aimings, feints and squints
You were allowed before you'd shoot, all those

Hunkerings, tensings, pressures of the thumb,
Test-outs and pull-backs, re-invisagings,
All the ways your arms kept hoping towards

Blind certainties that were going to prevail
Beyond the one-off moment of the pitch.
A million million accuracies passed

Between your muscles' outreach and that space
Marked with three round holes and a drawn line.
You squinted out from a skylight of the world.

Lightenings 1.iii Seeing Things, Seamus Heaney¹

The Tracing Floor was made in response to a request from the School of Architecture in UCD to create an exhibition that would accompany our lecture in the Into Practice series being held there. We were invited to show one building and we chose the new chapel for Ripon Theological College in Oxfordshire. The title of the series made us think about the way we design and

Tracing Floor,
York Minster
1350-1539



Tracing Floor,
York Minster
*Drawing by John
Harvey 1977*



we wanted to make something for the event. We were offered a room for the exhibition, which is connected by a doorway to the lecture hall. We chose to make something that would stand beside, rather than duplicate, the content of the lecture.

In conceiving this piece, we reflected on a number of interrelated matters; the history of the building as the old Masonic School, remembered by elegant carved and tiled symbols on walls and floors; the exacting tradition of hand drawing in the School during my time there in the 1980s and a desire to communicate the contemplative and communal activity of drawing that is practiced in our own studio. We found a reference to the old English tradition of the tracing floor used by medieval masons to set out jigs for vaulting.² Remnants of these can be found in cathedrals such as York, Wells and Hereford. They were made of plaster and they show the marks of drawing and cutting.³

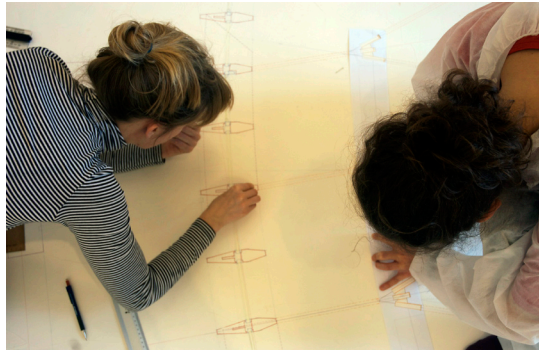
Professor John Tuomey described the exhibition room as the spiritual heart of the School and it is in the central flow of circulation. We were curious to know if it could be blocked and what effect that might have on movement in the building. We liked the idea of something very fragile becoming an obstruction. By covering the floor in lime plaster we intended to create an inversion of the natural light in the space. We wanted to fill the whole floor of the room. We hoped that foot traffic might gradually erase the drawing, enhancing its fugitive quality. We made a time-lapse piece from the ceiling recording its emergence and dissolution. We edited the film so that it has a drawing-like quality.

The drawing is a plan showing many layers at once. The chapel is organised around one pure ellipse containing an antiphonal arrangement of seating and surrounded by a narrow ambulatory. The pure central geometry is focussed on the lectern and the



Installation in
progress

UCD, 18-21.02.11



NMLA team
drawing

UCD, 18-21.02.11

altar. Outside the ambulatory, the singular form is broken down into a collection of attached structures that contain spaces for individuals or groups to pray in intimate settings. In many of our buildings, the plan has a particular antecedent. Here, we acknowledge our debt to Rudolph Schwartz' church of St. Michael in Frankfurt from 1954. In our case, we moved the structure to within the surrounding walls, making a perimeter ambulatory to recreate the narrative of conversion suggested in Richard Sennet's description of the Palatine Chapel at Aachen.⁴

The status of the drawing cannot be justified as a depiction, an instruction or a cutting jig. We consider the manual repetition of the original setting out of the ellipse as a meditative or ritual activity more akin to beating the bounds. The project team carried it out at a liminal moment in the life of the building; the design has been completed and the construction is soon to commence. This project is the slow, rhythmic act of making the piece. It allowed us to dwell in it in a way not permitted by deadlines and drawing software. We moved apart and came together on the same floor over four days. All the time we talked about how we got here and what the chapel might become. The marks on the floor are the record of a contemplative activity. So, the act of drawing the nave was itself a still point, reflecting the double meaning stored in the origin of the word.⁵

Drawing Team

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FOOTNOTES

¹ Seamus Heaney, *1. Iii Lightenings. Seeing Things* (London: Faber, 1992)

² Peter Salter, 'The Fan Vault' Architectural Review (January 2011)

³ John Harvey, *A History of York Minster* Edited by G.F. Aylmer and Reginald Cant. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977)

⁴ Richard Sennet, *Flesh and Stone, The Body and the City in Western Civilization* (New York & London: W.W. Norton and Co., 1994) p.

⁵ i. Nave, navis, ship
ii. Nave, nafa, wheel hub, umbilicus