A projective site: inhabiting the metaphorical interval between the instrumental and symbolic meanings of architecture

Nick Roberts
Athfield Architects, Wellington, New Zealand
E-mail: nickroberts16@gmail.com

Historically, there have been two primary ways of perceiving space that have been considered opposed to one another. First is the analytical, measured space of representation - the drawings and models architects make, which have historically been called the 'instrumental' (as they are instruments in the description of architecture). Second is the sensory, embodied space of a direct perception of architecture as built. This is generally understood as our primary way of understanding space. This work challenges that they are independent and oppositional ways of understanding space.
Key words: instrumental, symbolic, representation, perception

For architects, the discovery of their decline as active ideologists, the awareness of the enormous technological possibilities available for rationalising cities and territories, coupled with the daily spectacle of their waste and the fact that specific design methods become outdated even before it is possible to verify their underlying hypothesis in reality, all create an atmosphere of anxiety (Manfredo Tafuri).

The project pursues this line of enquiry by considering the studio as a 'site', and seeks to extend to boundaries of this 'site' by reifying the idea of an architectural space that exists between a physical building and its representation in drawing and modelling. This is a speculative project where I have sought to establish a metaphorical interval between the studio as a space of creation – commonly associated with autonomy and representational conventions, and the immediacy of built space as that which is directly experienced and lived in.

The notion of 'site' is explored through a design enquiry that attempts to distil a complex way to occupy architecture – that both real space and the space of representation can be occupied simultaneously. I have called this between-space *A Projective Site*: It exists between real and representational space; coupling the sensory, embodied complexities of inhabitation (of the former), with the abstract, instrumental characteristics (of the latter).

The intention is to challenge the idea of architecture as a purely instrumental and autonomous discipline. Such architecture attempts to derive all meaning from its own internalised logic, and impose control on external reality. In this sense, its legitimacy is determined independent of context; however such conceptual purity is never maintained in reality. Our direct experience of space is seen as something that disrupts this conceptual purity. This proposal operates in an overlap between how one designs and represents architecture from the supposed stability of the studio, and how it is experienced as built space. Rather than view these conditions as opposites, this work argues that the qualities of real and representational space are constantly permeating the assumed boundaries of each other, and that consequently, an architectural space exists between them.

Figure 1
Selected models and drawings for presentation.

Figure 2
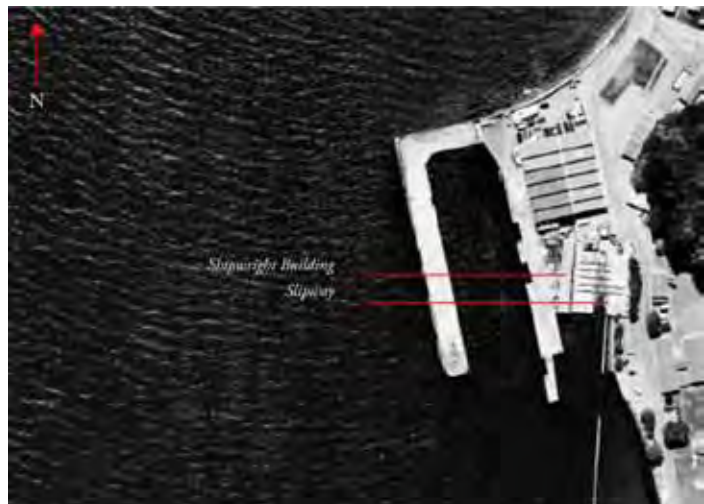**Shipwright building - Shelley Bay, Wellington.**

Figure 3
Site Plan - not to scale.

In order to pursue the notion of a Projective Site, an existing real site was required (figures 02-04). This was in order to test and translate the inhabitation of real space into the space of representation. The chosen real site was an abandoned shipwright building in Shelley Bay, Wellington - New Zealand. While the building was conceived as a purely instrumental and rational structure - exposure to site conditions and the radically altered social context now means it hovers as an ambiguous and abandoned structure. The displacement between the building's strict utilitarian conception and its current state, created an ideal framework for exploring a

Projective Site.

In establishing a methodology for the subsequent design explorations, the space of representation has been treated much like a real site, in other words, it has been imbued with all of the embodied complexities of real space. The reason for doing this is that our direct experience of space is seen as something that disrupts the conceptual purity and singularity of meaning that is often presented as reality in instrumental representations. This disruption can be most clearly evidenced in the difference between the way an idea is conceived, versus how it is received by others - it is never the same. Robin Evans has noted this gap in the 'displacement and indirectness' (Evans 1997: 156) that occurs as the architect in a conventional design process, does not directly produce the built architecture. The building is constructed and inhabited in ways that are never wholly predictable, and beyond the architect's direct control. Therefore it is pertinent to re-address the space of representation as an allegorical site to real: it is a site that the architect inhabits directly as unstable ideas becomes translated through universal and stable representational techniques. Thus, a plural nature to reality emerges; a latent condition of embodiment (which is explicit in real space) becomes present in the stripped back, supposedly neutral, space of representation.

Figure 4
Interior of Shipwright Building

The notion of dwelling in, or inhabiting, representational space as one would inhabit real space sets up a complex framework for the following design explorations. By setting up a parallel process of inhabiting real and representational space simultaneously, this project attempts to draw a connection to the more literal nature of dwelling. This suggests that the inter-dependence between the interior and exterior aspects of the dwelling or 'home' has an allegorical association to the interdependence of real and representational space – and by extension, studio and site. Dalibor Vesely notes that 'there is a certain logic to the origination of so many of our intellectual achievements in the relatively small world of the dwelling' (Vesely 2004:191). This notion highlights the relationship between the our assumed stability of internal environments of the

home and studio, and the wider social contexts that are needed to both place our ideas and to give them relevance – the shift between autonomy and situatedness. On a more direct level, Jonathan Hill has observed the conventional historical assumption on the nature of the dwelling, as well as its actuality which is often suppressed:
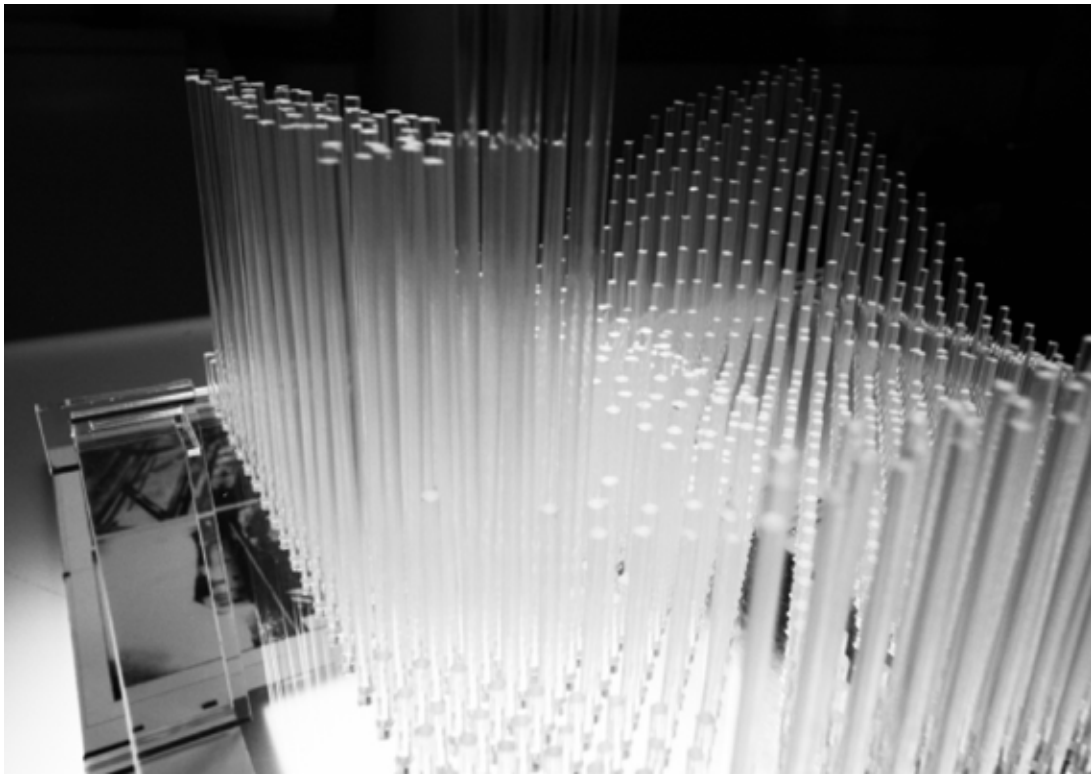

Figure 5
Site Reconstruction - a data field of the surrounding context translated into a perceptual field.
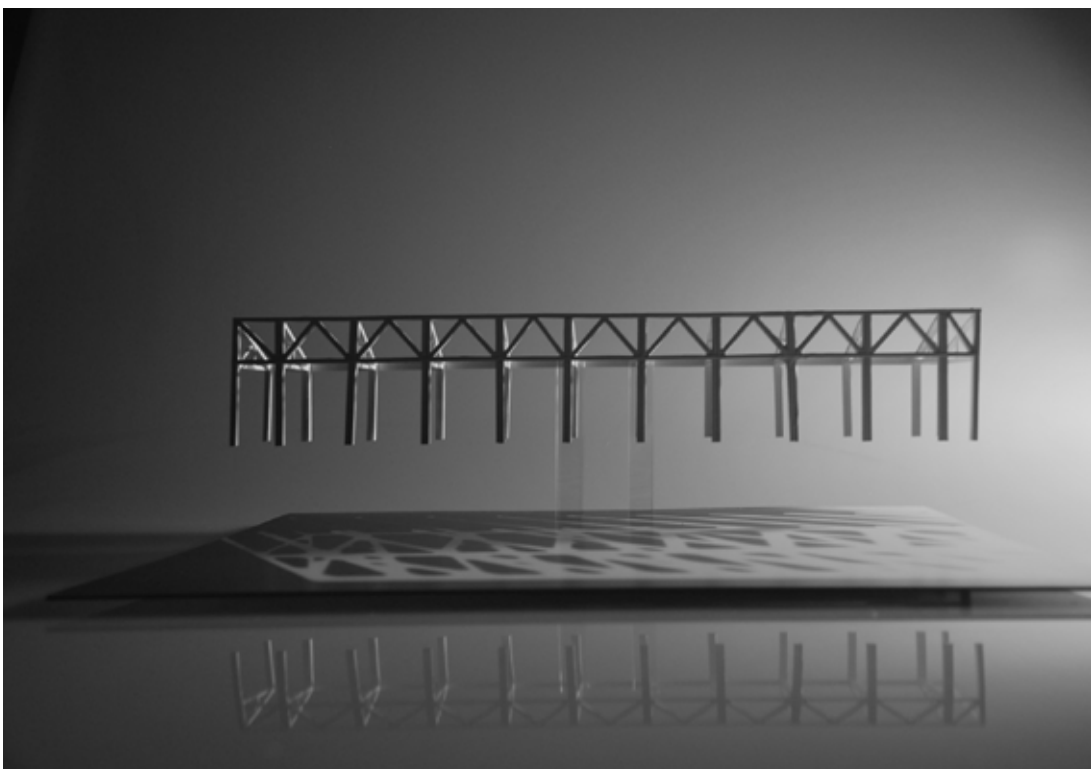
Figure 6
Photogram Model | 01.

Figure 7
Photogram Model | 02
The Photogram model (figures 6-7) attempts to articulate an overlap between real and representational space. This occurs through an inversion of the traditional space that the real and the representational occupy. The shadow's characteristics of instability - through constant movement and spatial distortion - are employed metaphorically as an individual perception. The photogram technique was employed to collapse this moment of perception into the space of representation. Using a darkroom, a light was shone through the model of the structure onto photo-sensitive paper, attempting to capture a moment where the shadow would shift from sharp to blurred the further away it got from the structure. This was to communicate a continuity between the measured and precise nature of the model, and the perceived distortion of real space as one inhabits it in everyday situations. A perceptual moment is stabilised and recorded into the space of representation, while a stripped back, instrumental version of the building's structure now hovers above as a perceptual object.

'Home must appear solid and stable because social norms and personal identity are shifting and slippery... The purpose of the home is to keep the inside inside and the outside outside'(Hill 2006: 8).

The design work described in these images and their attendant descriptions pursue an inward translation of my direct experience of real space, corrupting the purity and singularity of meaning present in the original instrumental drawings of the Shipwright building. The process of inhabiting real and representational space simultaneously created a metaphorical interval where the instrumental slips into a perceptual state, wholly affected by the phenomenal effects of real space. The section model for instance (figures 08-10), challenges the viewer's conventional relationship to representation. In this model 'vision has... been assimilated into the body' (Hansen 2004: 232) – one cannot change the image of the model without changing their bodily

relationship to it. Instead of being granted an idealised image that approximates real space, those engaging with the model establish their own views and relationships to it. It is important to note that the real site - the wider context of the shipwright building is never shown directly, rather, the external site is shown in the way it *conditions* the internal space. Thus the neutral qualities of instrumental representation become conditioned by greater external forces – that of a direct experience of space.
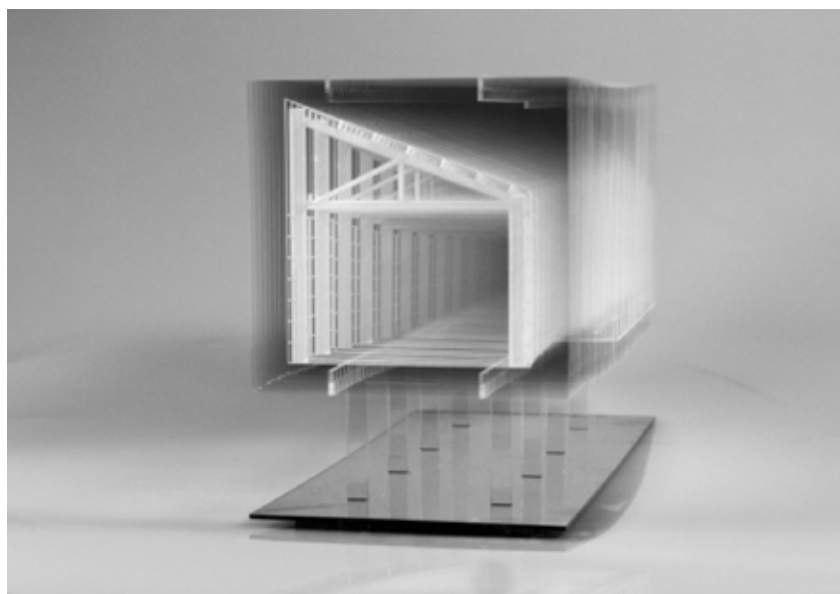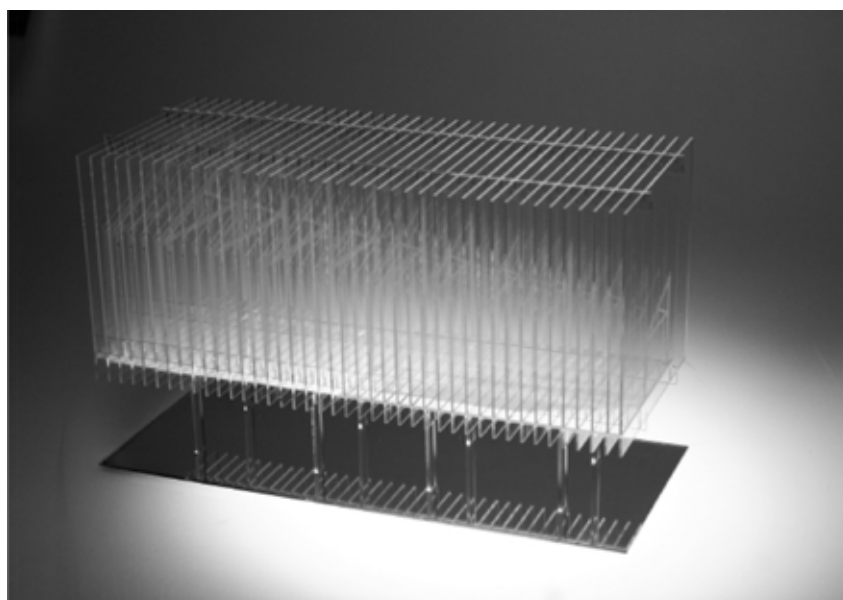

Figure 8
Section Model | 01.

Figure 9
Section Model | 02
The Section Model recontructs the first time I understood the nature of the building which was a view down its length similar to a one-point perspective. While this conventional representation presents a highly controlled and idealised interpretation of reality, this model starts to shift as soon as the viewer does: an attempt to communicate more directly the nature of real space. Thus, the model is simultaneously

experiential and analytical, as one moves around the model, the precise section drawings shift and blur to resemble a space before flattening out again once more to reveal the construction of each segment of the building.

The spatial atmosphere, and central technique to the series of explorations shown here, is one where I have sought to meld the psychological effects of a personal experience of the actual spaces of the Shipwright building, into the instrumental representations of the building. This generates an equal presence of precise analytical qualities, sustained by an embodied experience which generates an indeterminacy and overlap between the affect of full scale embodied space, and stable architectural conventions. (figure 10) In this sense, one describes the other - one can observe an inter-dependence between perceiving and designing space as both are inhabited simultaneously.

Figure 10
Section Model | 03
Figure 10 is derived from the Section Model and attempts to communicate the spatial atmosphere of the Projective Site. In this image I have sought to meld the psychological effects of a personal experience of the actual space of the shipwright building, into the instrumental representation of the building. The most salient effects include the impression that the internal space is of an overwhelming scale, which is not apparent when viewing the building from the outside, and the quality of light as it filters through the trusses, which appeared to float high above me.
By inhabiting the neutral representation of the trusses in this image, the drawings start to infer the experiential qualities present in the real space of the building. Rather than place an avatar into the space to indicate that someone has, or is, inhabiting the representational space – I instead sought to create an effect where a previously stable and analytical drawing becomes heavily distorted - as if it has been merged with the irrational memory of the exact same space.
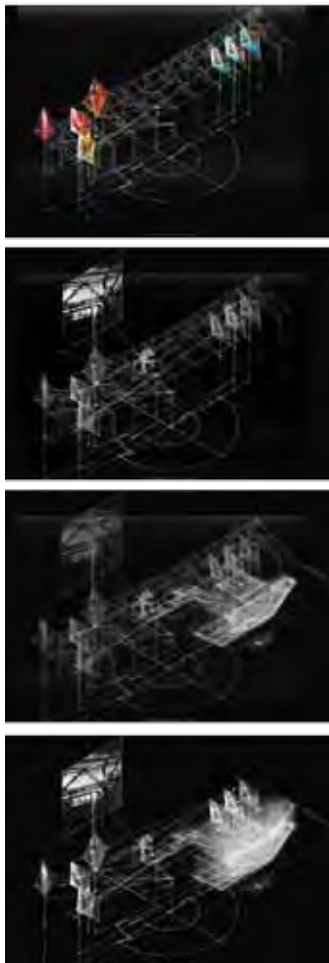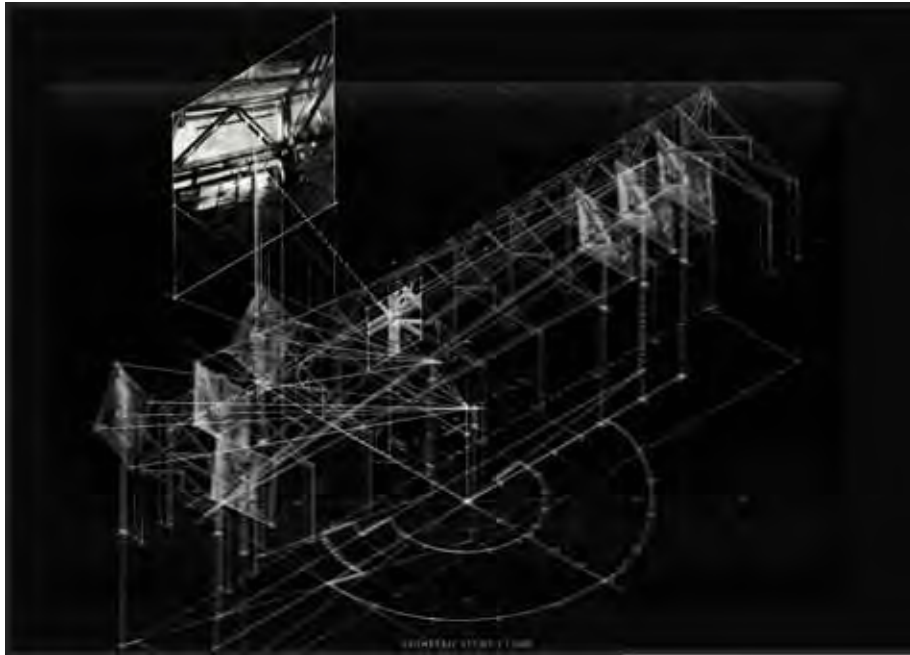
Figure 11
Isometric Series
This series of drawings represents a cumulative build-up of the inhabitation and perception of the real space appearing as structural as the literal structure of the building.
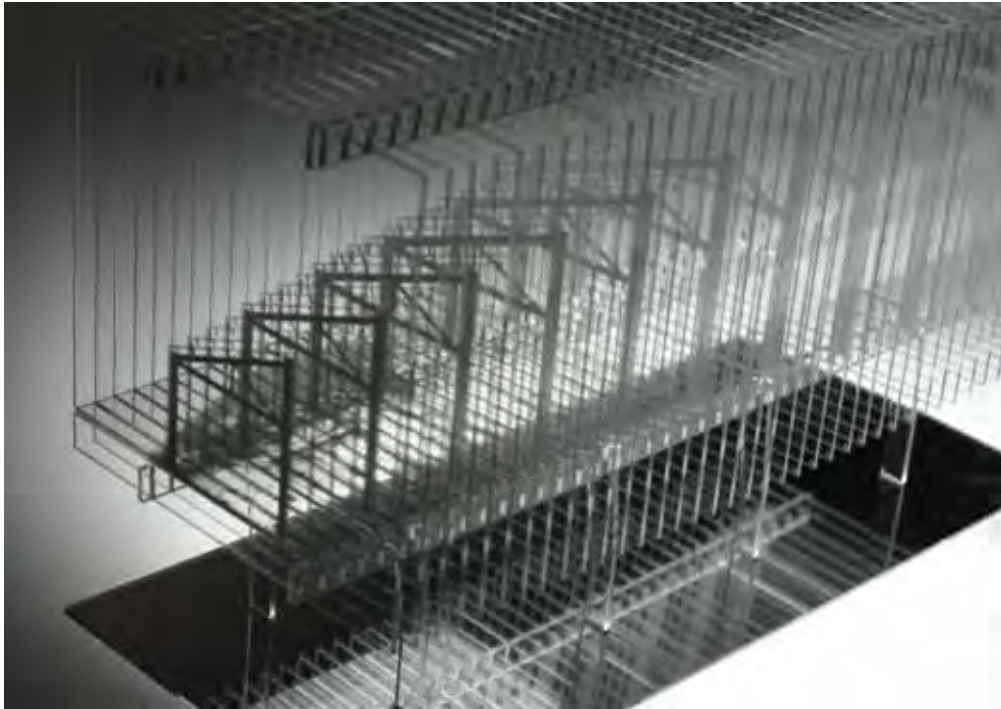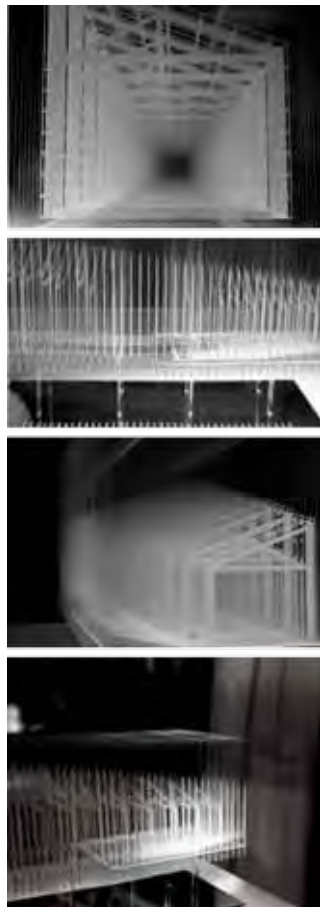
75

Figure 12
Section model | 04.

Figure 13

Details of section model.

Figure 13
Section Model | 05.

Section Model | 05 (figure 13) develops further the notion of psychological effects occurring in real space, affecting the space of representation. This image differs from figure 10 (section model | 03) in that the position of the viewer is noticeably outside the building structure. The aim of doing this is to collapse the normative relationship of the viewer to a representation: that the 'privilege of the viewing subject is maintained' (Allen, 2009: 24). When one exists outside of a site, i.e. in a studio, everything is reduced to the observable, measurable and defined. However, because the experiential qualities of the real space have been merged into this image, the distinction between being inside or outside of the site is lost. In this sense, one is caught between in a Projective Site, where the characteristics of the instrumental and symbolic understandings of the building dissolve into one another. This space is a *metaphorical interval* between the two - it is only available as metaphor but provides an argument for their reciprocity.

The Inhabitation Model (figures 14-16) is a development from the Section Model where I sought to address various ways I had inhabited the building more directly. The model slips out of the picture planes toward a stripped back version of the building's structure. This transition marks the emergence of a complex mapping of inhabitation which is represented by the rapid-prototyped model. A parabolic shift articulates this transition to the parts of the building that I occupied most. The form maps out not only the physical inhabitation of the building, but also becomes complicated by less direct means of inhabitation such as the memory of spaces, spaces I had drawn in my sketch book, and spaces that I had imagined emerging within and through the existing structure as a direct response to it.

A recurring theme throughout the drawings and models that constitute the Projective Site is the instability, or lack of, a ground plane. This is to allow the drawings and models to oscillate between being representational of the actual building, and also perceptual objects in their own right. The instability of the ground plane is most effectively realised in this model: as one's eye level moves to the hovering ground plane, the mirrored space becomes as material as the actual modelled space. Furthermore, the mirrored parabola - the moment of transition, generates the most unstable space of this ground plane, defining the ambiguous space of translation between picture plane and structure.
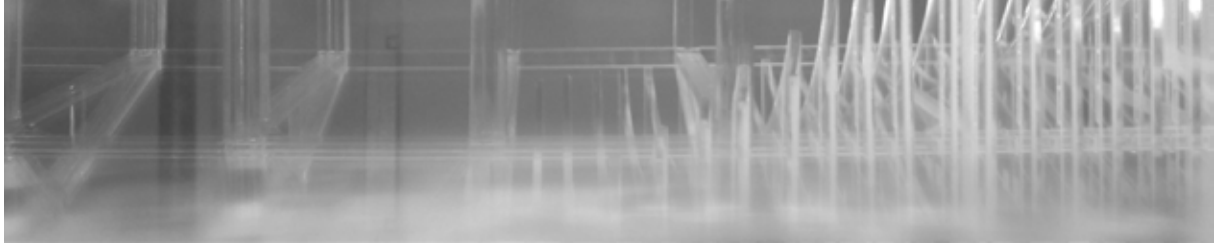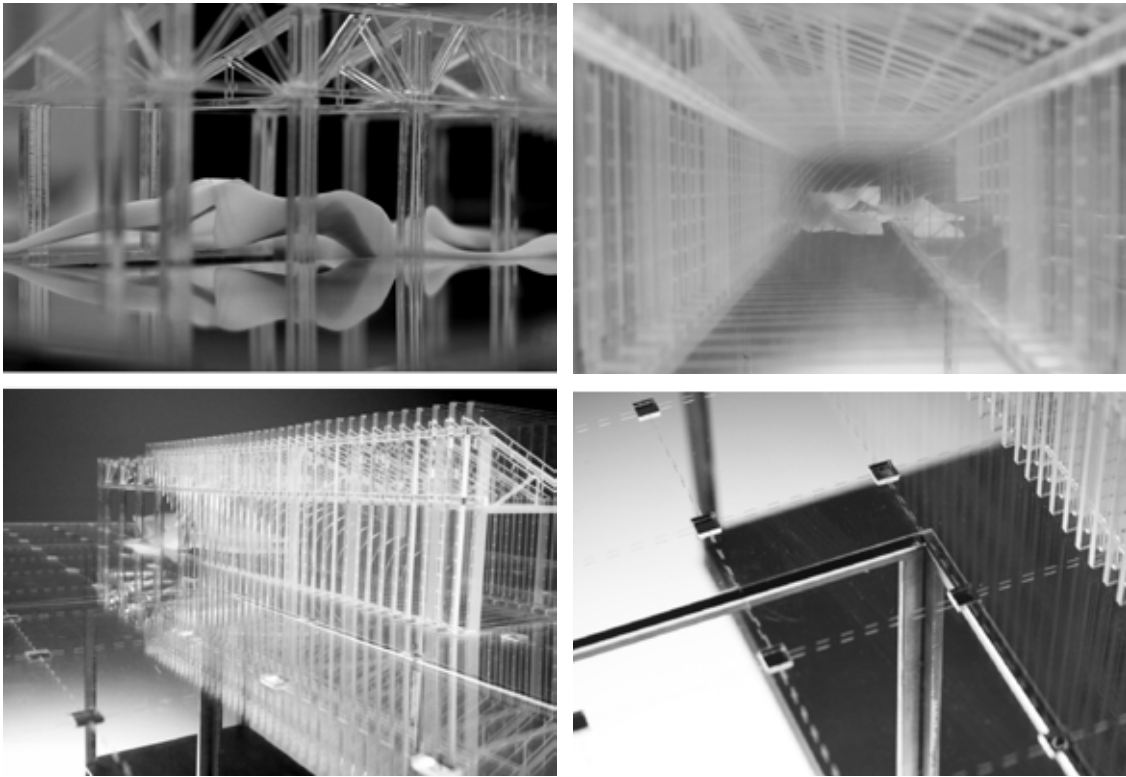
77

Figure 14
Inhabitation Model | 01.

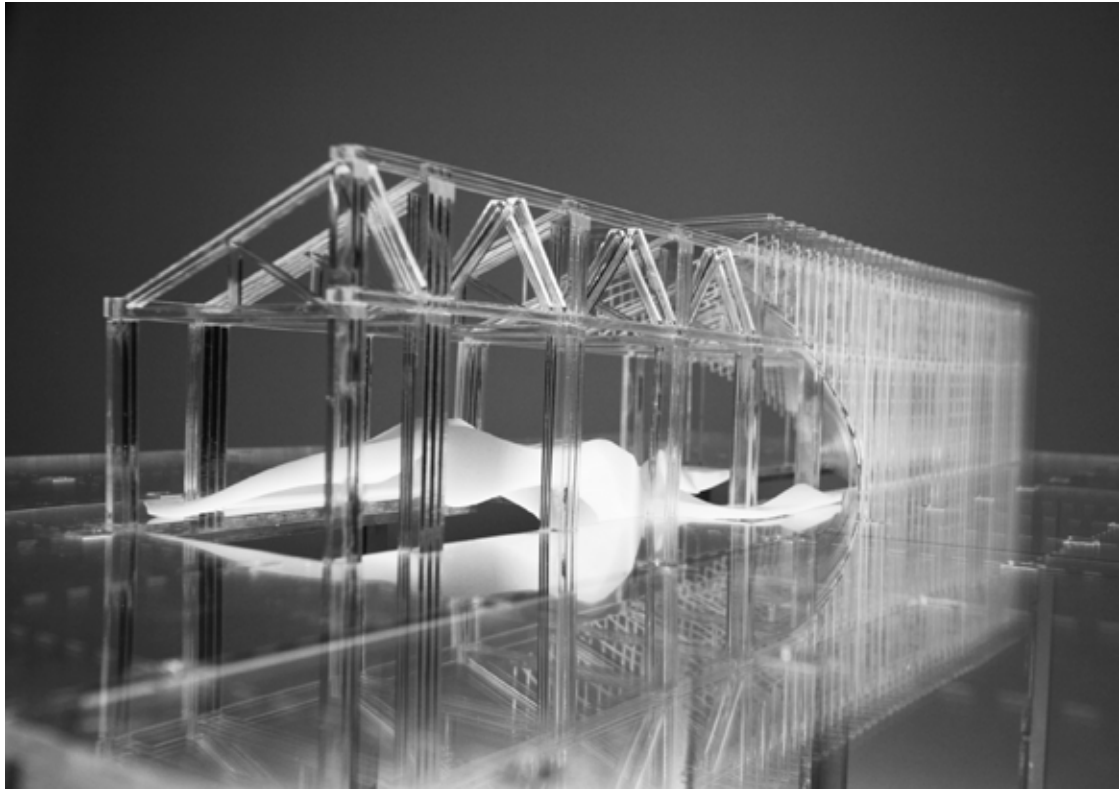**Figure 15**
Inhabitation model details.

Figure 16
Inhabitation model | 02.

Conclusion

The site described in the preceding design investigations which does not necessarily exist anywhere physically, and is essentially held in the imagination, ironically puts forth the importance of architecture's relationship to site and context as it is conventionally understood.

The translations and projections occurring within and through the representational and the real reinforces the idea that pure instrumentality is an illusion, only maintained when one considers the act of translation as a neutral device. This suggests that the instrumental is inherently bound to the symbolic and is thus far more flexible then when it is considered in isolation - as a superior, more accurate representation of reality. Architecture's ability to mediate conditions that are conventionally read as opposites can be framed as a strength. The conflicting conditions the discipline engages with in practice is something to be explored not suppressed - in this sense legitimacy can not be derived from pure autonomy. By engaging these notions, the instrumental finds new application beyond its generally accepted syntax and our site-specific perceptions can become more communicative to a wider sphere of discourse - in other words, they are capable of greater reach. The observation that the direct inhabitation and the attendant perceptions of real space, are not dissociative to the abstract, analytical nature of representational space prompted the explorations found in the design work. The project was to engage a parallel process of inhabiting real and representational space simultaneously, in order to create a metaphorical interval where the instrumental slips into a perceptual state, wholly affected by the phenomenal effects of real space. Instead of creating a nowhere space, the design project aimed to be sited at a crucial interval between the immediacy of perception and the instrumentality of representation.

Finally, It is important to address the relevance of projects of this nature - projects about representation. I believe it is especially relevant to re-examine the role of representation in architectural practice: in the current context of rapid technological growth and instrumental certainty, it is increasingly important to examine how these developing tools for architectural design become culturally situated, relate to their context, and our direct perceptions of them. This work seeks to push beyond an *either-or* debate. That is, architecture *either* as a purely instrumental, *or* critical practice. It is instead driven by a desire to understand the inter-dependence between the factors of architecture's interior - its autonomy, and the external social and ecological forces that shape it and give it relevance. By exploring the gap between how architecture is designed and represented and how it is experienced as built space, this work suggests that representation can become a more effective tool in bringing the role of critical practice to everyday sites and situations. This has been the role of the Projective Site. By engaging the plural nature of reality via a parallel process of inhabiting representational and real space, an in-between site was located where the instrumental and the symbolic can be found to give structure and meaning to the other. The focus of the design research in this instance may be small, but it attempts to contribute to the study for the engagement of these wider questions about the architectural practice.

Works Cited

Allen, S. 2009. *Practice: Architecture Technique + Representation.* Abingdon and New York: Routledge.

Evans, R. 1997. *Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Essays.* Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Hansen, M. 2004. The Affective Topology of New Media Art, in M. Hansen (editor), *New Philosophy for New Medi*a. Massachusetts: The MIT Press: 197-232.

Hill, J. 2006. *Immaterial Architecture.* Oxon and New York: Routledge.

Tafuri, M. 1976. *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development,* translated by B. La Penta. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Vesely, D. 2004. *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation – The*

Question of Creativity in the Shadow of Production. Cambridge and London: The MIT Press.

issuu.com/nickr.

Nick Roberts is a graduate architect based in Wellington, New Zealand. Nick is currently working at Athfield Architects Ltd. and has previously worked for Simon Twose Architect. This project was part of his final year thesis work and was selected as a finalist for the NZIA Graphisoft Student Design Awards. Roberts' work can be found online at http://issuu.com/nickr.