

The investigation into the study area revealed a number of spaces in which sounds dwell but people do not. An architectural strategy was developed in order to emphasize both the spatial and sonic qualities of these spaces and make them inhabitable. This strategy centres on the chair as a spatial device that enables the act of sitting and listening. The chair can be seen as one of the smallest architectural strategies with which to occupy the most diverse of spaces. The investigation of the chair in the city is situated within an acoustic festival framework for Pretoria that is controlled from a proposed infill typology that takes advantage of the types of spaces discovered and the myriad of concrete framed buildings within the city centre.



Design Investigation

The Little Red Chair: A Rationale

The Little Red Chair becomes an emblem for the research undertaken, the first of a possible series of ‘tactical objects’ that conceptualise certain ideas in designed form. By using an object-driven methodology for a spatial investigation, the chair avoids the fundamental pitfalls that have affected the relevance of the traditional idea of architecture. The chair is a recognizable archetype, both functionally and aesthetically. Chairs, in their ability to be moved around with relative ease, promote micro-architectural scenarios of interaction and response – one can sit on a chair alone, they can be grouped together intimately, or arranged in ordered rows – each configuration suggests a certain use and interaction. The way chairs are used can also be interpreted on an individual level, for example in the way they are sat upon will vary from person to person.

However, by augmenting the object, by subverting its intended and easily legible use, in turning it into a tactical object for the use of research, it can become more than simply an object; it can take on a personality of its own. Geoff Manaugh (2009) discusses the role of furniture typologies in the artworks and installations of Chinese artist Ai Weiwei. For Weiwei, furniture plays a greater role than the traditional idea of simply ornamenting a space: it breaks up space, offers moments of rest and stoppage, gives rhythm and can be deliberately misused; furniture can “interrupt, challenge, and deform” (Manaugh 2009). Gerrit Rietveld, the Dutch architect, furniture designer, and De Stijl member wrote that “... chairs will become abstract-real artefacts of future interiors” (in Manaugh 2009), suggesting that furniture could “anticipate [or] even require new ways of experiencing architectural space... demanding the very space which it comes to dominate... [and affecting the way] we understand and inhabit space tomorrow” (Manaugh 2009). For Ai Weiwei, his furniture pieces are not ‘passive inhabitants’ of a room but exert a transformational force on the spaces around them. Manaugh (2009) invests great energy to describe Ai Weiwei’s pieces in the poetic manner they deserve, for example:

“*Tables at Right Angles...* is really just one table that has misunderstood itself, reeling back from its own projected double. Mistaking its own eccentric solidity for the architecture that surrounds it, this table will never realize that the world it thinks it touches is just another part of itself.”

(Manaugh 2009)



▲ Fig. 189-191
 Images of Ai Wei Wei's furniture pieces
 From left to right: table with three legs,
 table at right angles, grapes

In this way he enhances the symbolic and implied content of the pieces, highlighting their inherent character, destiny, and tension.

Bernard Cache (in Speaks 1994:298) suggests that architecture is the art of the frame and that the relationship between furniture and architecture is one of how to frame the landscape or geography. However, although geography is understood as something that lies *exterior* to architecture, he also describes furniture as a peculiar type of ‘personal geography’, thus geography *becomes* interior as furniture images. Thus Cache (in Speaks 1994:298) practices architecture by manipulating things that are supposed to be framed, and doing it in relation to the frame architecture provides.

If furniture, but more specifically in this case chairs, are considered remnants of our ‘personal geographies’ mapping our interactions and response to them and to differing social situations, collecting untold stories of the people and places they encounter, would it be possible to turn these simple objects into witness’s of our contemporary urban condition; objects with ‘ears’ that listen to the open fields that they meet. Thus, through an exploration of a chair as an augmented furniture typology, it becomes possible to *listen* to the contemporary urban condition and inform an architectural response that is a spatial side-effect of their listening capabilities.



Mini-Precedent: Bins and Benches
 Bins and Benches by Greyworld is a collection of bins and benches that have the ability to interact with the public and with each other. Solar-powered and GPS enabled, the street furniture navigates its way around a public square – running for shelter when it rains and singing when the sun comes out. Greyworld is a collective of artists and architects that specialise in performative public art works.

▲ Fig. 192
Bins and Benches by Greyworld



Mini-Precedent: Boombench
 Boombench is a piece of street furniture that plays music transferred to it from passing mobile phones via Bluetooth. Its execution at the Urban Play 2 event illustrates the possibilities in fusing electronic components and street furniture to create an interactive and performative piece.

▲ Fig. 193-194
Boombench by NL Architects



Mini-Precedent: Interior Design
 Interior Design is a film set in Tokyo about a young woman who feels useless in life. One day she turns into a wooden chair and begins to find a sense of purpose,

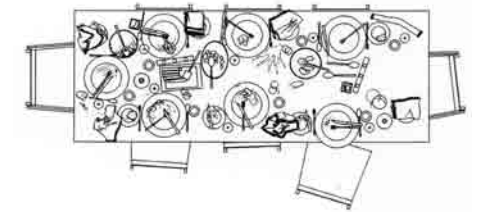
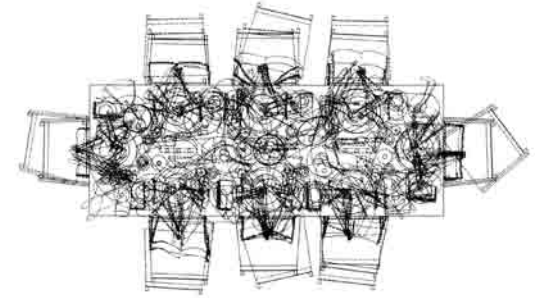
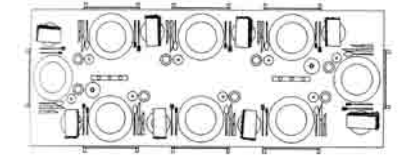
▲ Fig. 195-199
Still images from Interior Design film



◀ Fig. 203
What is the true scale of a chair?

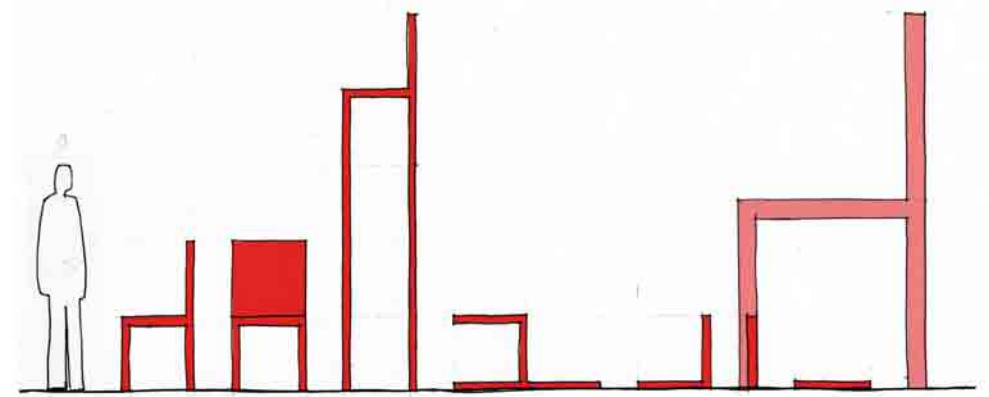


“Furniture: a kind of mobile architecture that mediates directly between body and space; the stuff with which to furnish and accommodate. The most beautiful pieces of furniture have a stature and nobility of their own, but are flirtatious too. They want to be part of the space game in a room, and to look as though they belong without losing a defiant independence that can justify their autonomy as objects.” Coates, 2003:297



▲ Fig. 200-202
Table Manners
 Rotring ink line drawings showing the table before, during and after dinner

▼ Fig. 203
What is the true scale of a chair?



Experimental Investigations

Object with Ears

During a crit session on the 16th of July 2009, a simple, red, plastic chair was equipped with ‘ears’ – a voice activated tape recorder strapped to the underside of the object. The chair took on the role of a silent witness during the crit session, recording snippets of conversations, derisive remarks, footsteps of pacing individuals etc. The chair became a reliable informant regarding the nature of its acoustic surroundings. The inhabitants of the space were unaware that they were being observed and went about their business as usual, the chair listening on silently.

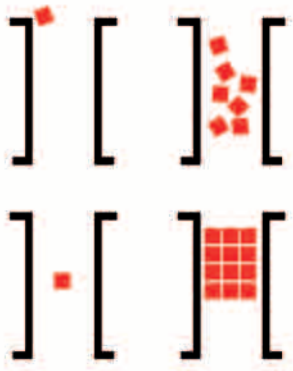
During the same crit a set of speakers were hidden in the room that played bird song and the sound of rain, traditionally associated with the external environment. The idea explored the insertion of alien sound sources within and existing space and the effect this has on its inhabitants.

Outcomes:

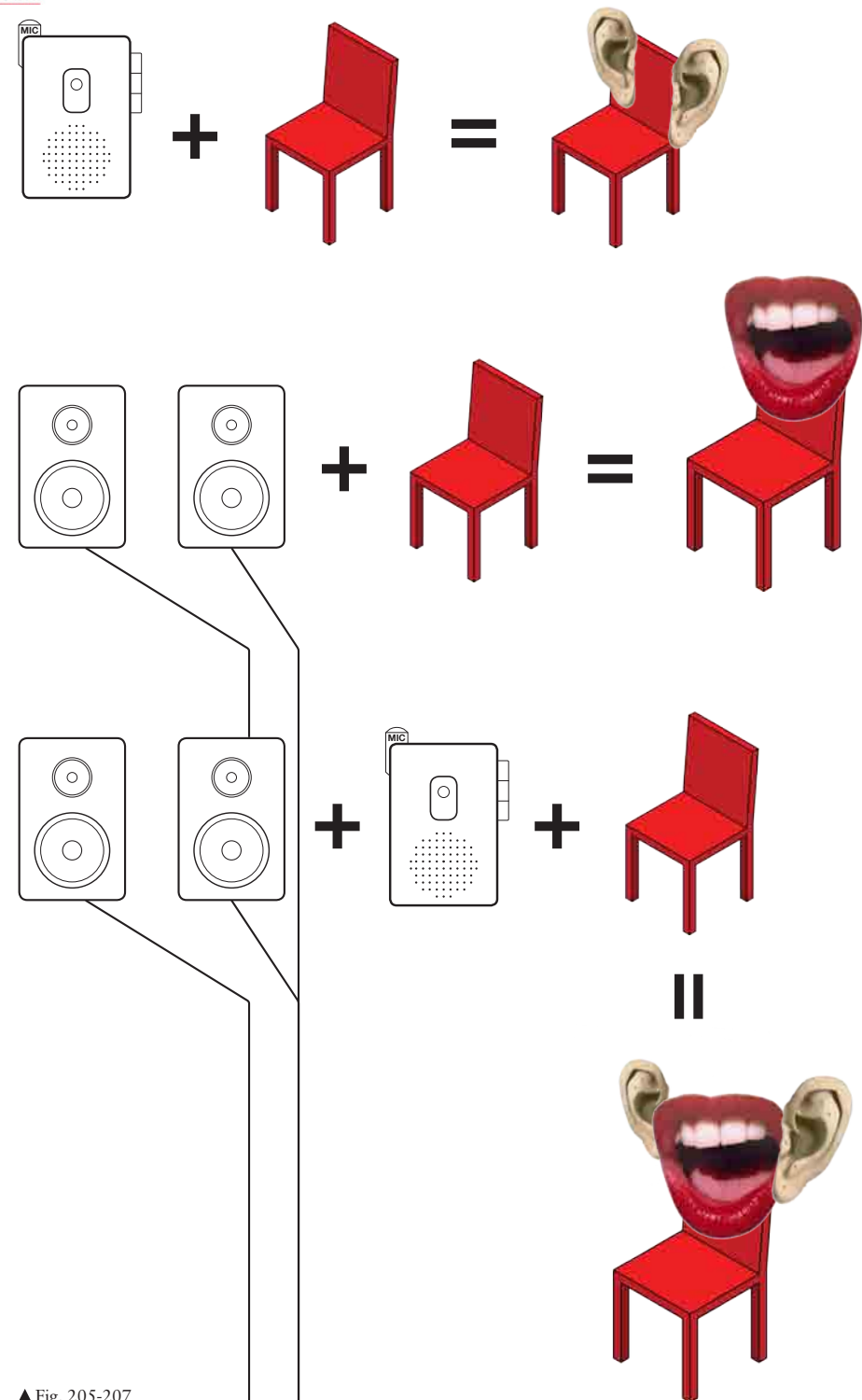
Despite testing the setup before the experiment, the voice activated tape recorder was too sensitive and resulted in too much content being recorded. Rather than the ‘interesting’ bits, the chair listened to everything within its vicinity. What was recorded though did reflect the acoustic nature of the room – quiet and slightly reverberant.

Micro-Architectural Scenarios

By placing the chair, or a group of chairs, in an environment where people can interact with them, the object reveals patterns of use that show, perhaps, what the object wants or desires spatially.



◀ Fig. 204
Micro-Architectural scenarios and mapping



▲ Fig. 205-207
Augmented chair; listening, talking, listening and talking



The Robin Day Stories

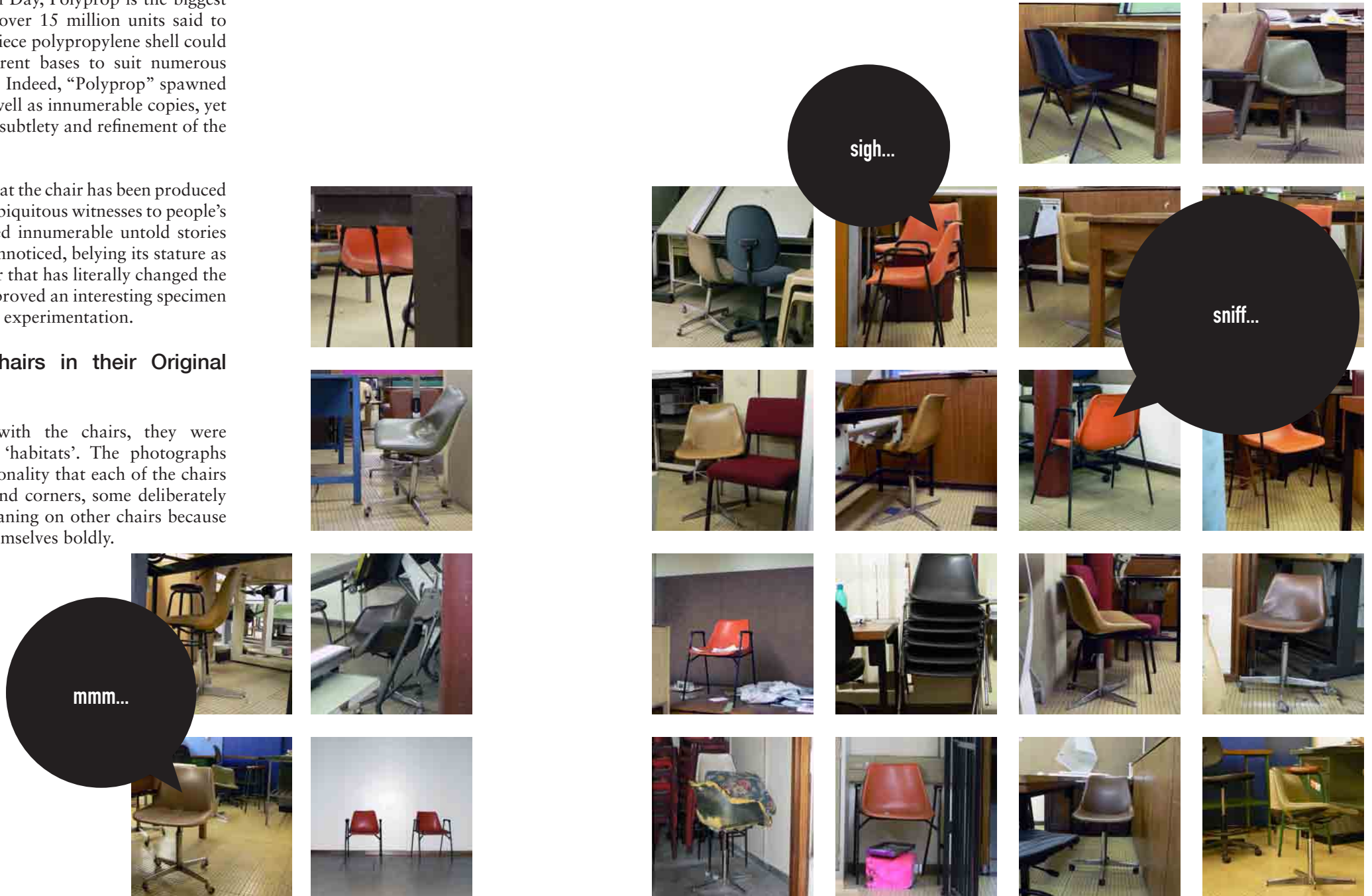
Whilst investigating the chair as a both a spatial typology and a silent witness, a large number of ‘Polyprop’ chairs were discovered lurking in the studios of Boukunde. Designed in 1963 by British designer Robin Day, Polyprop is the biggest selling chair of all time, with over 15 million units said to have been produced. The one-piece polypropylene shell could be fitted to a variety of different bases to suit numerous environments and applications. Indeed, “Polyprop” spawned an entire family of its own, as well as innumerable copies, yet very few can compare with the subtlety and refinement of the original.

The sheer volume of numbers that the chair has been produced in has created one of the most ubiquitous witnesses to people’s lives. Polyprop has accumulated innumerable untold stories and memories, yet often goes unnoticed, belying its stature as a true design classic. It is a chair that has literally changed the fabric of our environment and proved an interesting specimen with which to carry out further experimentation.

Documentation: The Chairs in their Original Habitats

Before anything was done with the chairs, they were documented in their original ‘habitats’. The photographs reveal a certain individual personality that each of the chairs possessed – some lurking around corners, some deliberately concealing themselves, some leaning on other chairs because of damage, some presenting themselves boldly.

▼ Fig. 208-232
Polyprop in its existing habitats





Missing: Responds to Polly

On the evening of July 26th, all 43 of the Polyprop chairs in their various forms and guises were secretly removed from their studio locations and hidden away. Their disappearance was accompanied by a 'missing persons' poster appearing on the doors of Boukunde; suggesting that the chairs themselves had run away due to abuse and neglect. The act tried to create awareness of Polyprop as a designed object and as the ubiquitous backdrop against which many of life's activities have been played out.

A number of updates were posted during the week, trying to create tension and mystery as to the location of the chairs. A number of responses were noted – from genuine concern that someone may have stolen the chairs, to wry smiles and bemusement.

Found! An Installation of Chairs

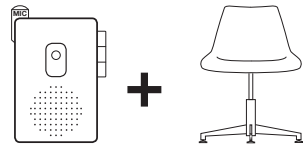
On August 3rd during a deserted night in Boukunde, the chairs amassed themselves in the foyer of the building, taking over the space for three days. The installation, under the guise of a design awareness project, was accompanied by a short fact sheet and collectible cards. However, the chairs were secretly witnessing the reactions to their sudden reappearance through the use of a voice activated tape recorder attached to the underside of one of the chairs.

On the first day the chairs simply witnessed; however on the second they replayed the recordings from the previous day whilst again trying to record people's reactions. On the third an alien soundtrack was inserted into the space featuring natural sounds, static noise, sound effects, and monologues from John Cage and Alvin Lucier.

► Fig. 233
 Missing propaganda poster and updates



Day 1:



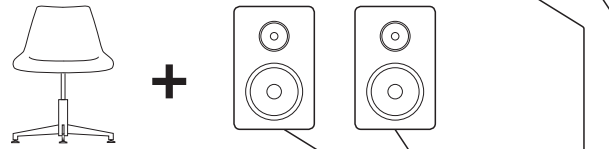
► Fig. 234
Promotional cards illustrating types of Polyprop chair

◀ Fig. 235
Illustrations of event programme; day 1, day 2, day 3

Day 2:



Day 3:



Outcomes:

The installation recorded the acoustic life of the building throughout the day; the unlocking of the doors in the morning and the arrival of various staff members, the cleaning of the floors, the startled on-lookers, concern for test not studied for, the midnight security inspections.

Conclusion

The experiment aimed to probe the chair as (a) a sonic witness, (b) a spatial device and (c) a visual cue. The range of reactions to the group of chairs varied from person to person, and was more distinct when snippets of sound were recognised. Particularly effective was the bird song and applause that was played on the third day; observers seemed to derive particular enjoyment from inanimate chairs singing to them and applauding them as they entered the building.



▲ Fig. 236
Installation in use by students, day 3

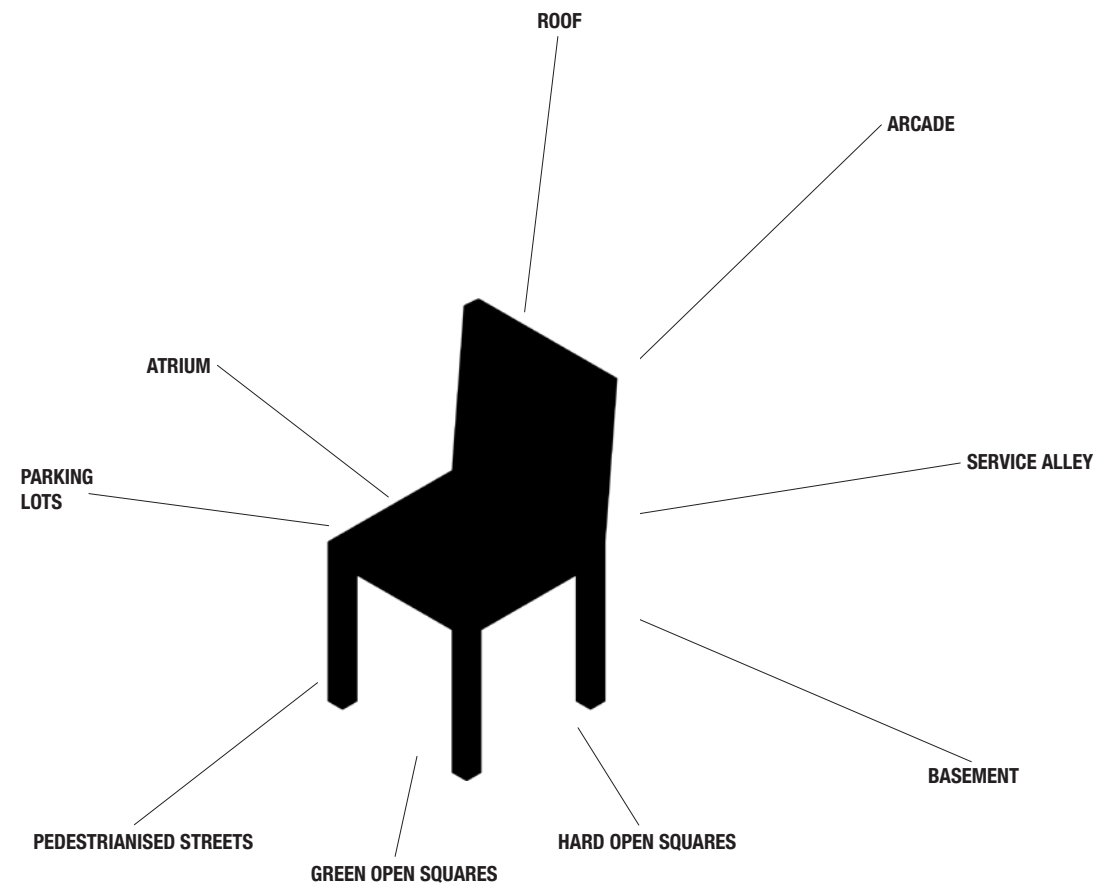
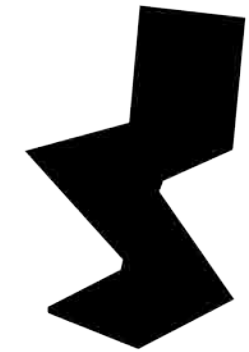
◀ Fig. 237-239
Photographs of installation

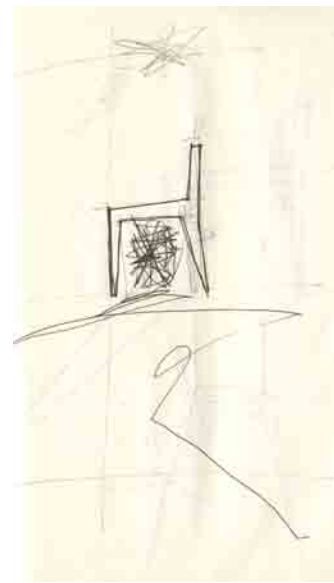
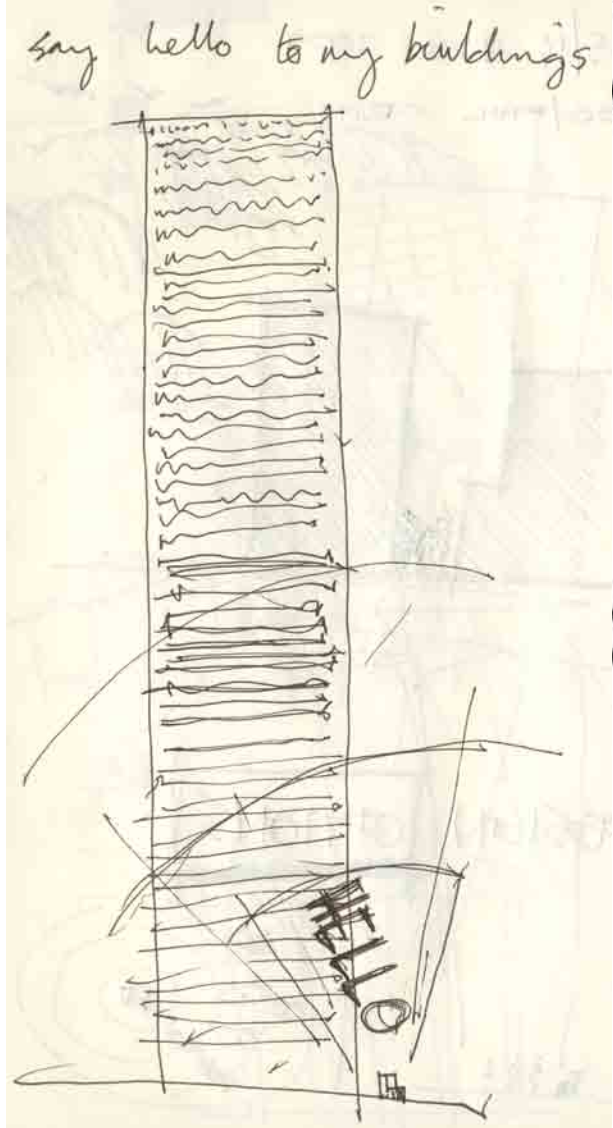
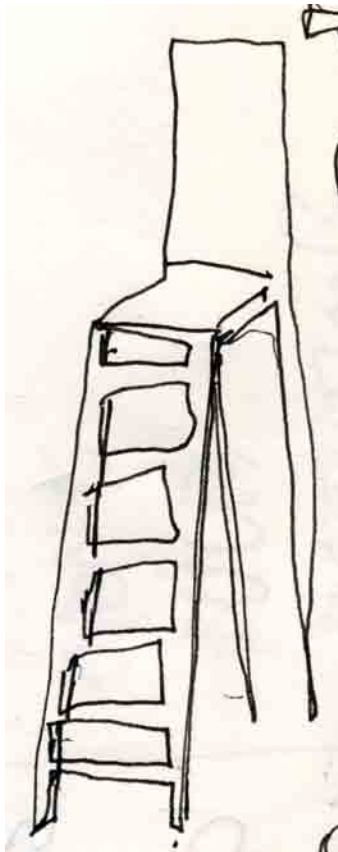
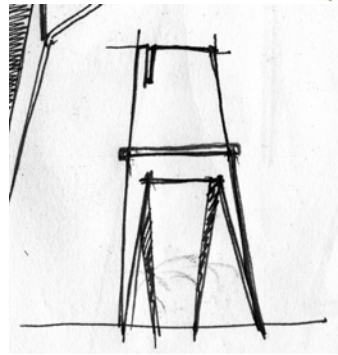
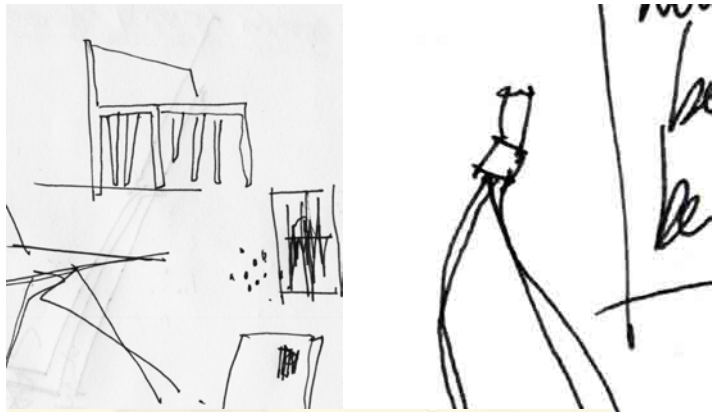


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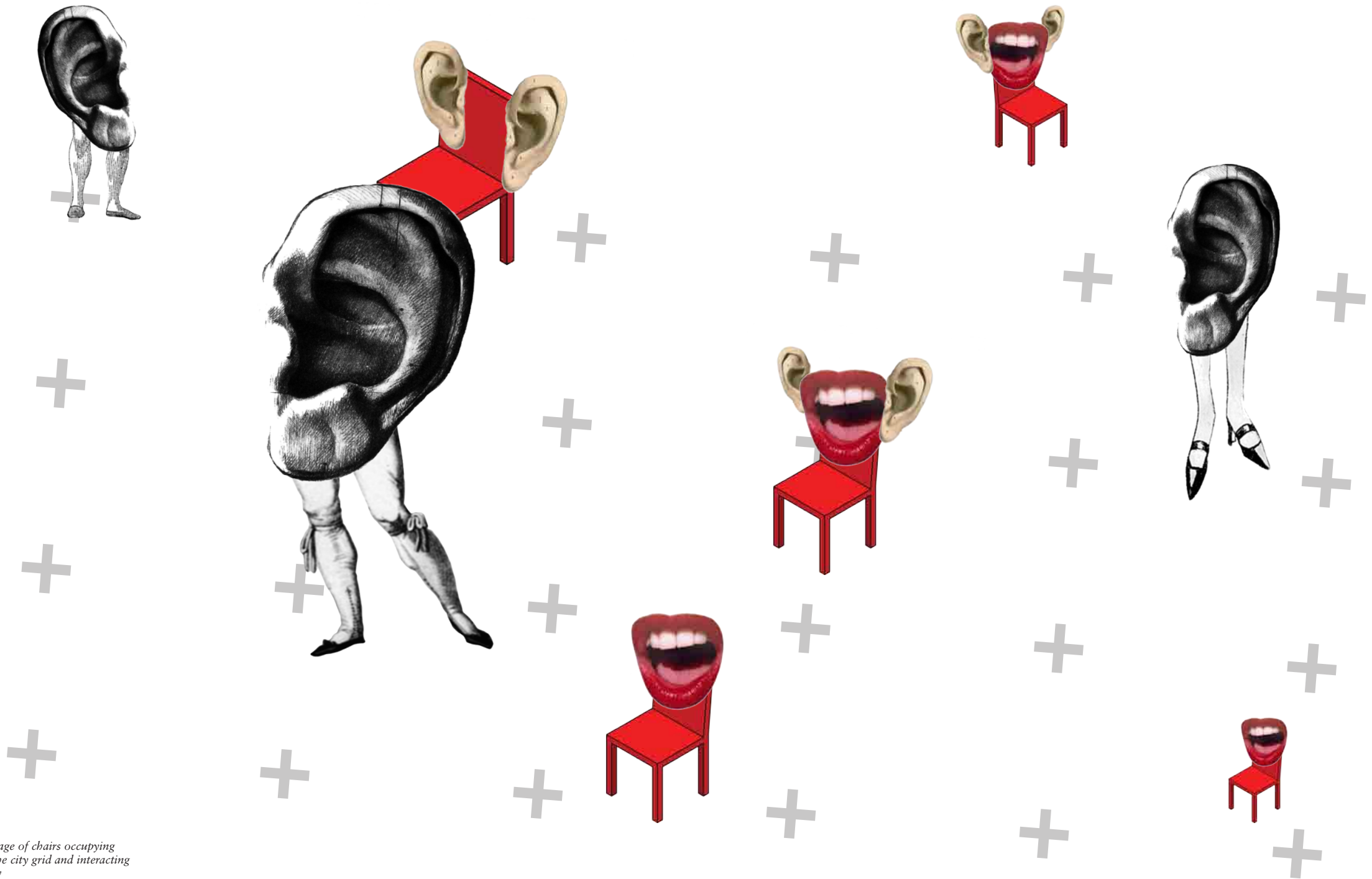
◀ Fig. 240
Famous chair forms chosen for aesthetic value

▼ Fig. 241
Diagram: how would the archetypal chair form change according to the sonic personality of its surroundings?





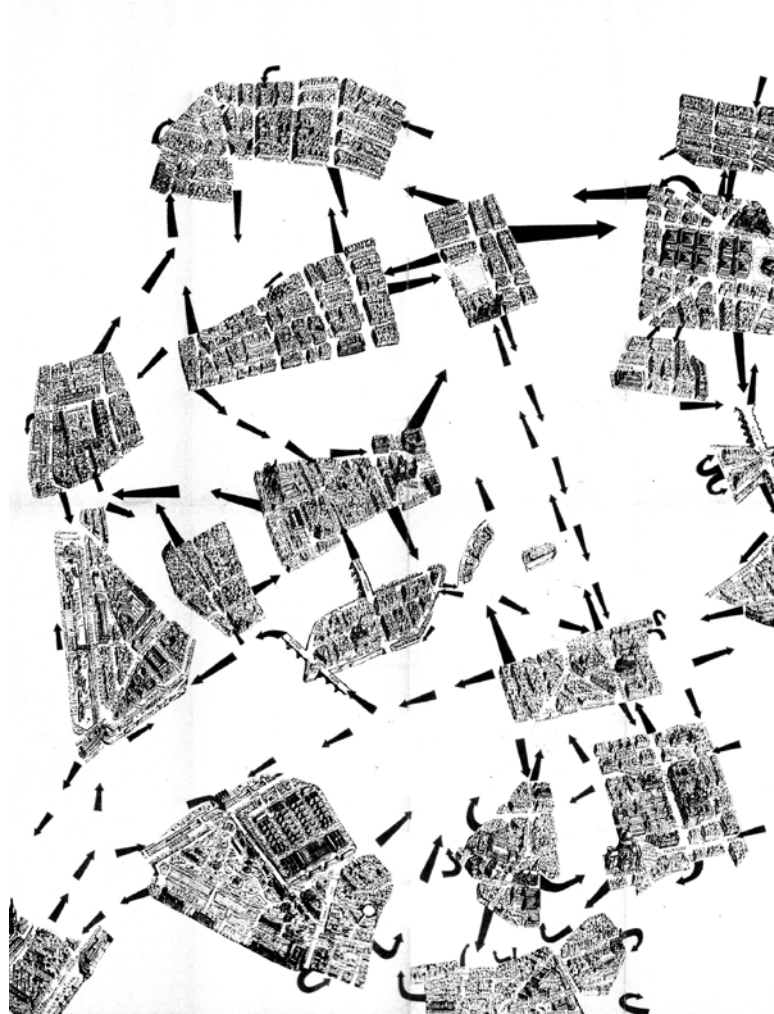
▲ Fig. 242- 248
Concept sketches



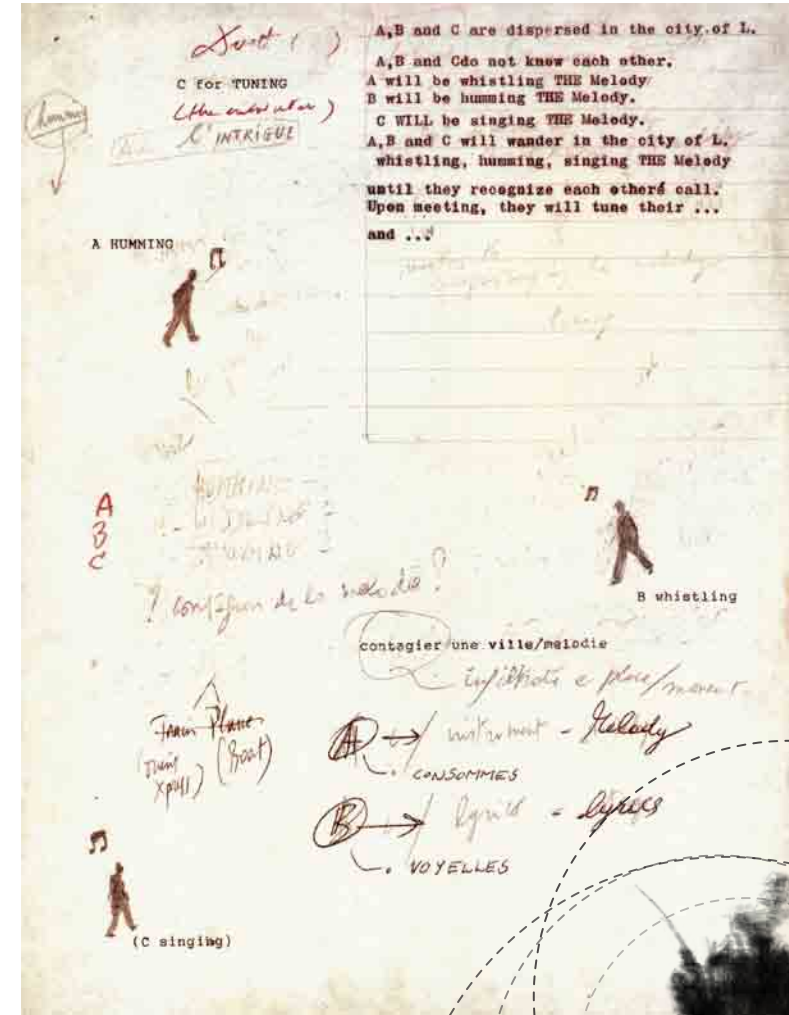
▲ Fig. 249
Conceptual image of chairs occupying
the spaces of the city grid and interacting
with passers-by



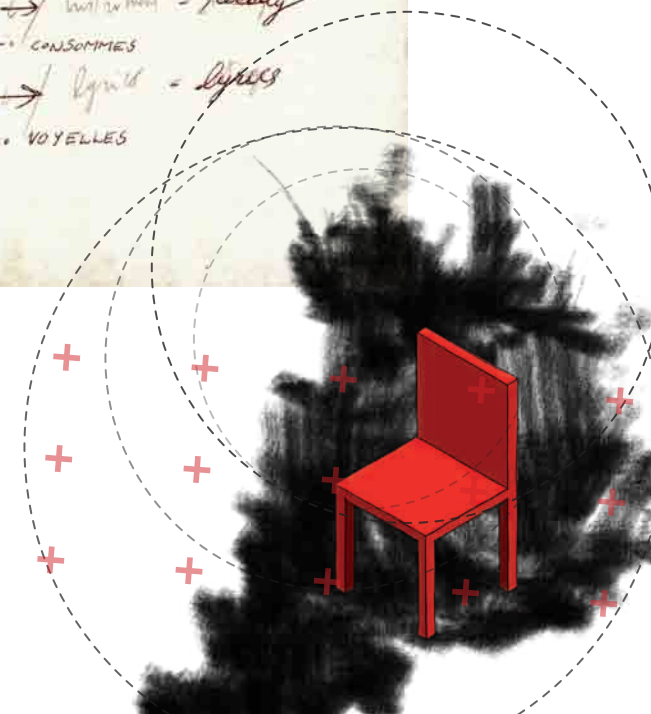
Using the possibilities of the chair as a spatial device =



▲ Fig. 250
Guide psychogéographique de Paris.



▲ Fig. 251
Instructions for A, B, and C; C for Tuning, A for Humming, B for Whistling



Sonic Festival + Infill Typology

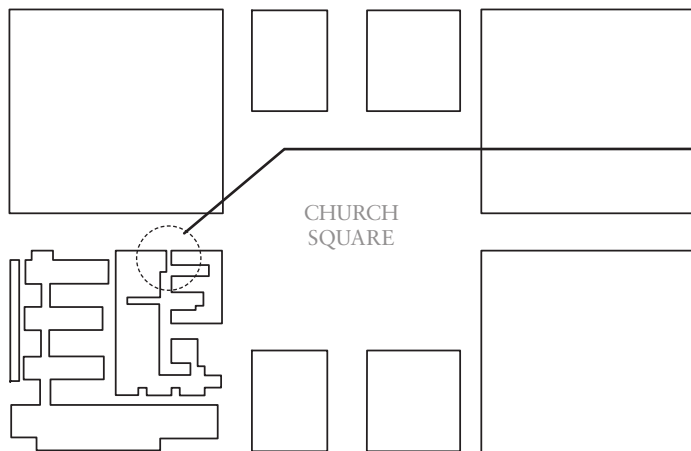
The investigation of the chair as a spatial device and earwitnessb, although valid, required a touchstone with the city to ground the exploration. It was decided to situate the experiment within the context of a sonic festival framework. The festival would provide the backdrop for a number such experiments that interrogate the sonic qualities of the city.

The festival mentality reaches out to people as an invitation to interact, thus re-establishing the relationship between the user, sound and the spaces of the city.

The basecamp for the festival is to be inserted within one of the inbetween spaces investigated, thus completing a more traditionally architectural element to the thesis, whilst maintaining the initial conceptual integrity.

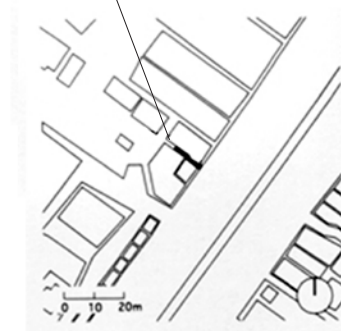
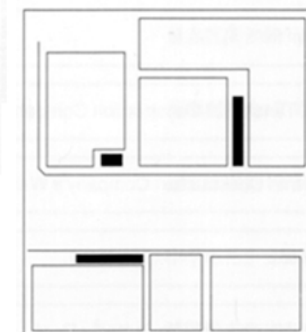
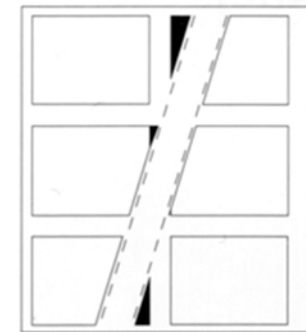
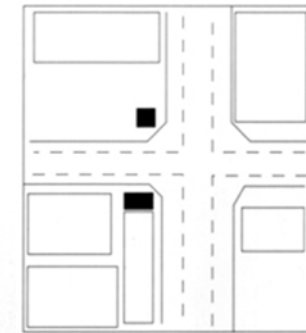
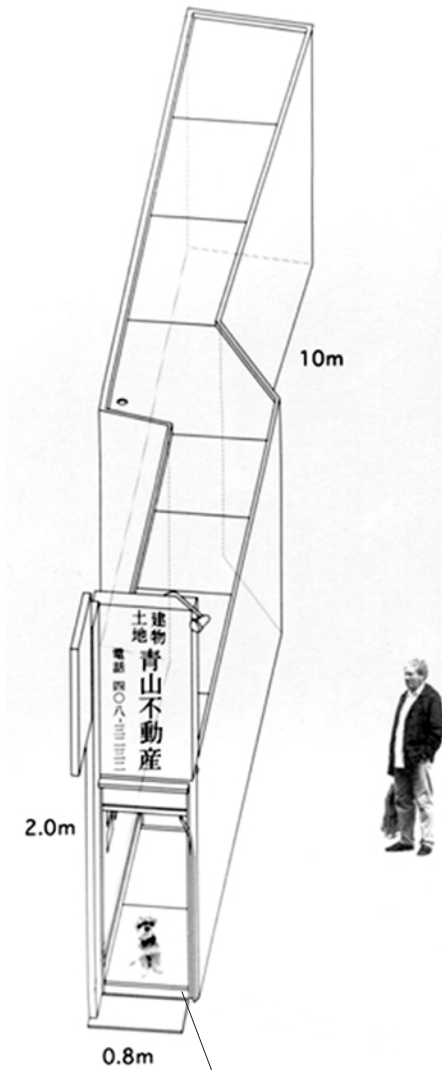
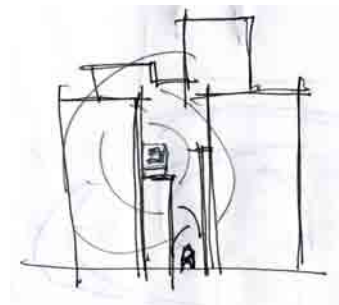
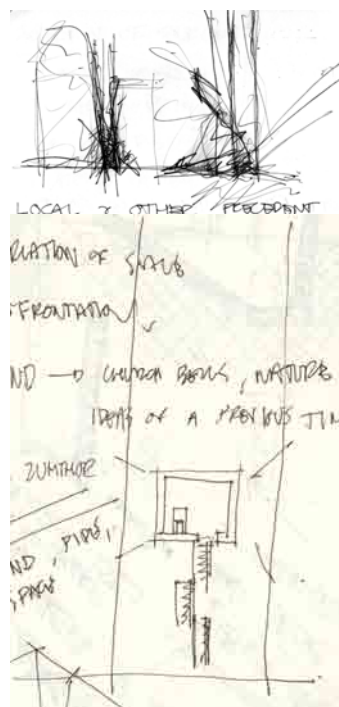
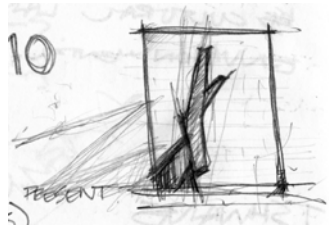
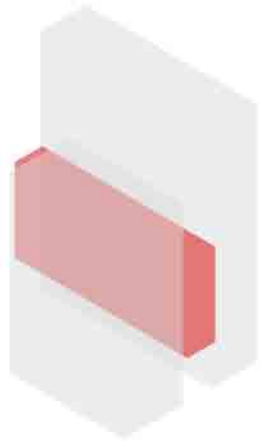


▲ Fig. 254
Photograph of site



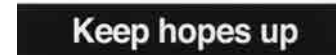
▲ Fig. 252
Possible festival brand

◀ Fig. 253
Location of site next to church sq



▲ Fig. 255-262
Conceptual Sketches

◀ Fig. 263-64
'Pet Architecture Series' by
Atelier Bow-Wow - parasitic
infill architecture of Japan



▲ Fig. 265-268
'True' public art installation - project generates public response and participation by covertly occupying public space in unexpected ways