

*"Nothing has changed man's nature so much as the loss of silence"*

Max Picard

To a lowland Scot, The Pier Arts Centre, Stromness, is located in the far north, a place more Scandinavian than Scots. To an Orcadian however, the Orkney Islands lie on the southern threshold of a more vivid, imaginative North, a line where hyperborean thoughts of *Thule* begin.

While mainland Scots look south for cultural confirmation as a practice we have a natural inclination towards an *idea of north*<sup>2</sup>. We are interested in an architecture that is positioned at the periphery. Alan Reich began our interest with building and its connection to a northern landscape, his insight was embodied in a slim volume 'Building Scotland, Past and Future' 1944, co-written with Robert Hurd. As well as recognising our northern tendencies, the other critical message of the book could be summed up in an Otto Kapfinger quote, *"Aspire to the highest standards of what is normal."*

This idea of landscape remains a constant influence in our work. We explore this open territory in all our buildings and projects. The Scottish landscape is prone to be viewed in a romantic picturesque way, merely useful for attracting tourists. The visible landscape has been shaped and will continue to be shaped by people and their attitude to it. Architecture likewise is all too often reduced to the visually scenic, simply reinforcing a superficial populist view of Scotland. We are concerned both by the picturesque romanticism of much mediocre building and paradoxically also by the *architect as architect*, a feted entertainer performing conjuring tricks for the cognoscenti with a weary box of visual effects.

We view our work through the mirror of a clear northern modernism. We continue to be interested in the simple resolution and appropriateness of an architectural proposition. Our buildings attempt to respond to the thin, low northern light, often soft and filtered through

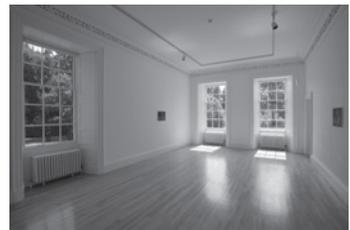


mist. This raking light reveals subtle changes in plane and texture; in contrast to the full passionate sun of the south, which needs deep modelling to satisfy it. We search for reticence and stillness, lightness and clarity. We enjoy buildings and places that promote reflection. A poet friend of the practice, Thomas A Clark, wrote that "*reticence is a kind of shade.*" As fair skinned northerners it is often wise to seek out the shadows.

Our affinity towards artists and their practice stems from both collaborative works, most notably Alan Johnston, and actual arts projects. Small gallery conversions for the Collective Gallery and Stills Gallery in Edinburgh's Cockburn Street developed ideas of movement and ambiguity. The gallery spaces themselves were conceived of as being architecturally neutral. Alan Johnston eloquently explores these projects in his text *Crystalline Reflections*<sup>3</sup>. Our renovation of Inverleith House Gallery within the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh again required us to remove ourselves as architects from the scene and render the spaces void of artifice. Stills Gallery was seen as apart from the city, an introverted space, while in contrast the Collective Gallery engaged directly with the street. Inverleith House was an entirely different prospect, a fine Georgian House set within a *hortus botanicus*. The gallery spaces enjoy open views into this enlightened landscape. A recent unrealised project was for the Peacock Visual Arts in Aberdeen. An ephemeral pavilion was imagined in the historic Castlegate, closing the relentless line of Union Street.

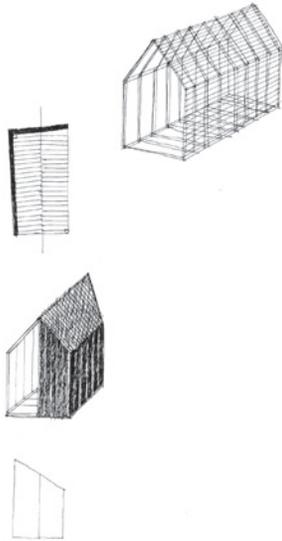
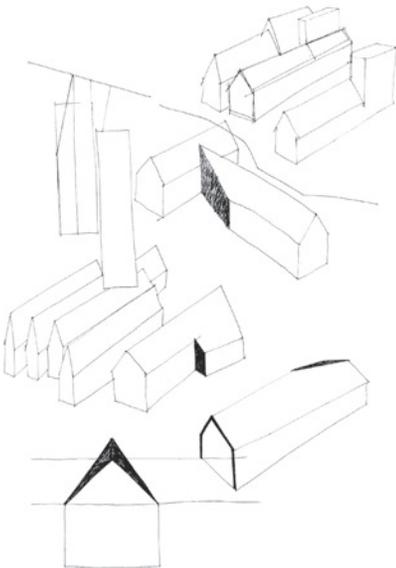
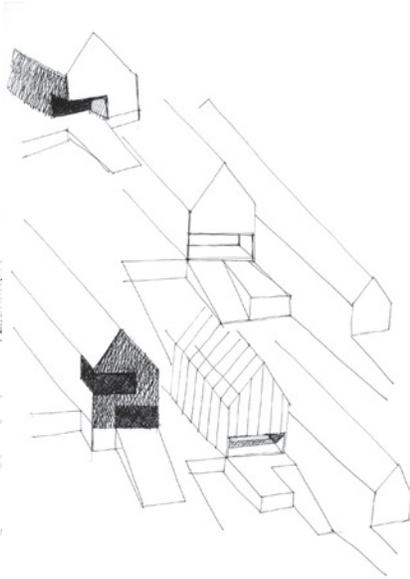
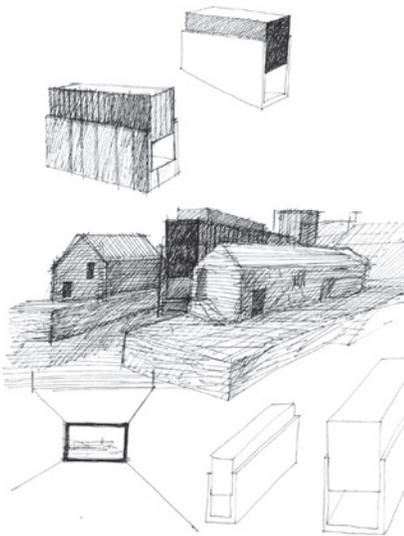
Our most enduring and important collaborative work is with Alan Johnston. It involved the creation and running of a small space for art. It is embedded in the basement of our offices. The *sleeper* gallery is a form of hospitality, a recognition of ideas. The notion that making connections is in fact a form of artistic practice is new territory for us as architects. Sleeper is a vehicle for an extended conversation with a circle of artists. Alan on his global peregrinations offers the space as a token of generosity to artists he meets and respects.

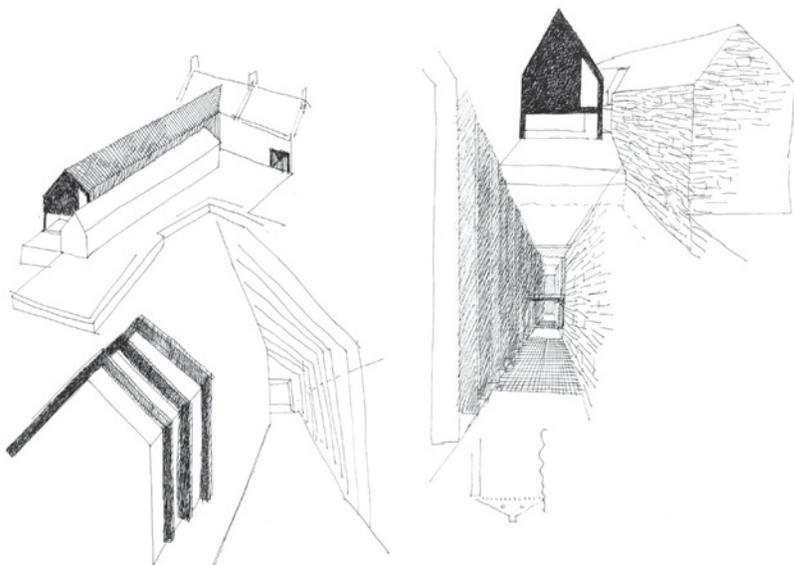
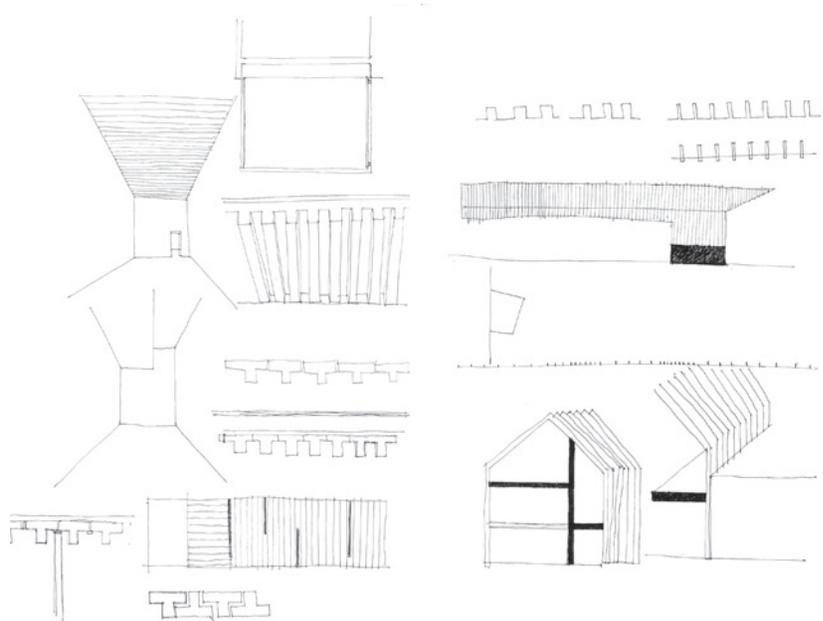
As well as sleeper we have enjoyed a number of

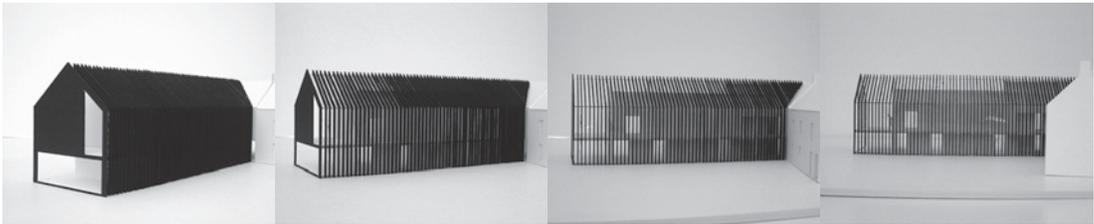
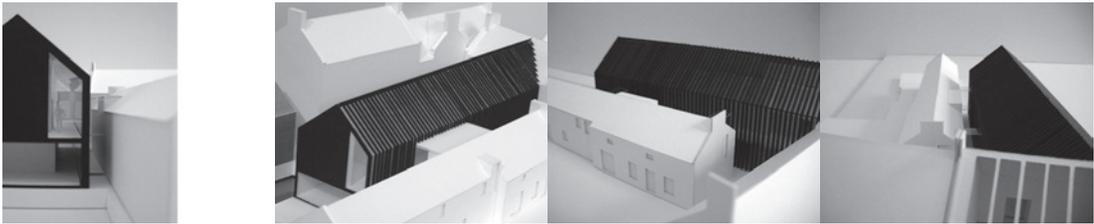
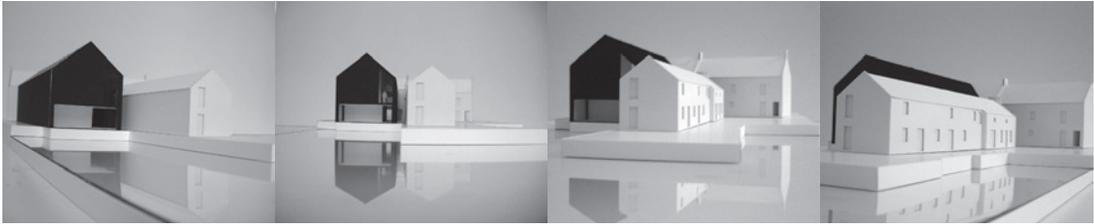
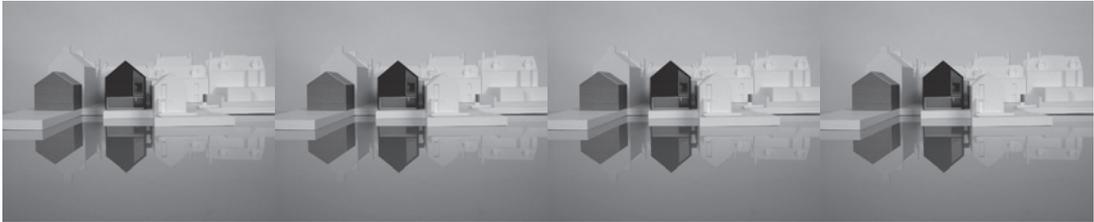


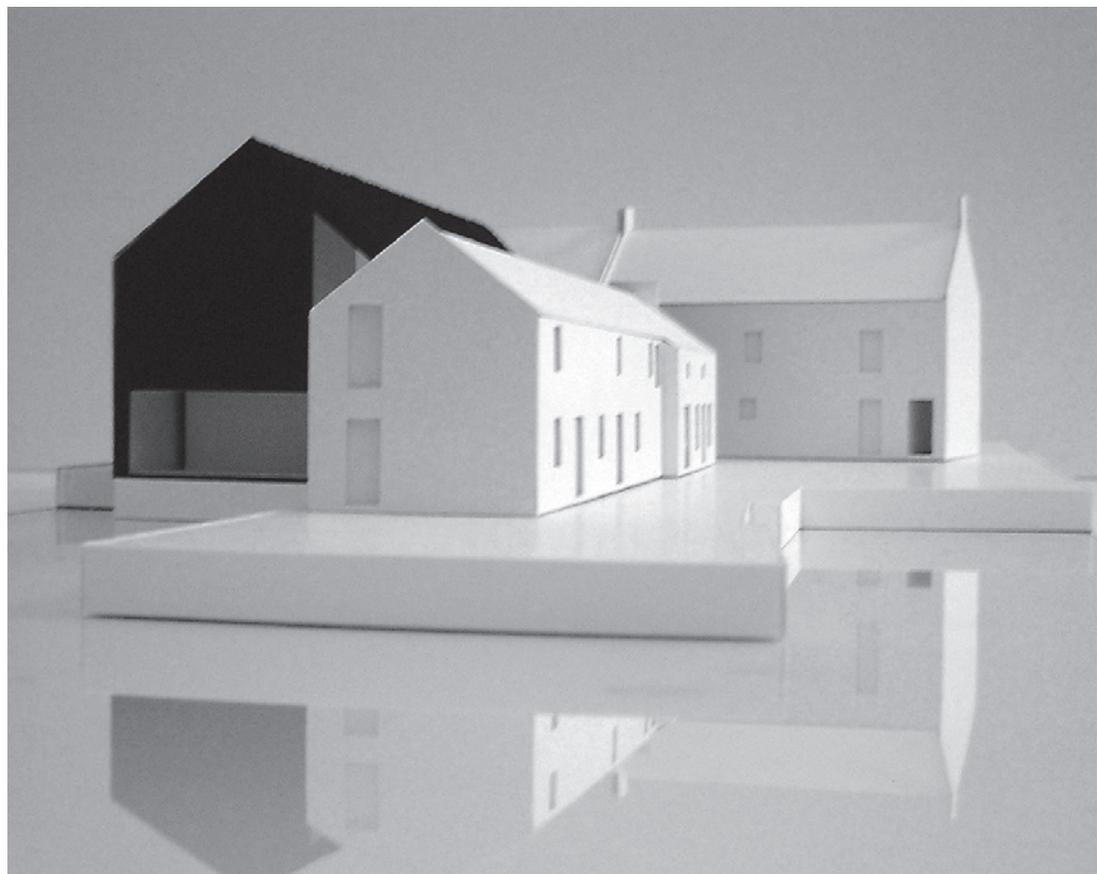












*BLACK OUTWITH WHITE*

Jonathan Woolf

The charming harbour town of Norwegian origin called Stromness is the result of two dominant building types huddled together into a weather worn hand. The ends of long chimneyless pitched roof sheds made of different materials upon dry stone bases like stubby fingers in the water and, by road, two storey houses placed either parallel or perpendicular, their chimneys flush to windowless gable ends.

This is an insistent and dogged morphology, a huddled together architecture that reminds me both of the position espoused in the built work and writings of Aldo Rossi and the responsively loose and nuanced buildings of the Portuguese architect Alvaro Siza whose work transformed these typologies into more expressive and freely open compositions. One might characterise the exterior expression of the project by Edinburgh practice Reiach and Hall - to extend the Pier Arts Centre with a refurbished building on the street and a new one facing the sea - as located somewhere between these two canons and, as such, offering a powerful regional exemplar.

The original Pier Arts collection remains in its low-lying parallelepiped of random rubble like a knarled piece of driftwood with knots for windows. Each of the two floors of this hollowed out log is a gentle inflecting room to room experience where the walls that define each room are only partly reconstructed allowing a sense of the whole. Reiach and Hall have adopted a strategy of careful restoration with quiet alterations, to a floor tile grid here, or a light fitting there.

The new building is more striking. 'Charred' black in colour it is parallel to the old, set further back from the sea, wider and higher, but otherwise markedly similar in form to its neighbours. It's roof and walls are in the same detail, but in fact the south face has a papery like surface of blackened Zinc with thin vertical shallow crease-joints whilst the north side has vertical ribbed beams with all glass infill strips. By maintaining a flush condition to the harbour façade, between glass and cladding, the continuity of the skin of the building and thereby the

overall archetypal form of a shed is sustained. On the street building the front façade treatment has the emotive presence of a face with a parti that relies on continuity of surface and deeply restrained tectonic. This is handled with assurance and skill.

Leaving the gallery to visit Melsetter House, William Lethaby's arts and crafts masterpiece on the Island of Hoy, I was impressed with the contemporary feel of the spaces. In particular how the Orkney light is manipulated and the way every detail contributes to the whole. Returning the next day to the gallery I met two artists, Ragna Robertsdottir and Alan Johnston, both of whom were enthusing over the new spaces of the new gallery as they christened them with their own works.

The new building is unquestionably a fine addition to the townscape of Stromness. From the harbour side the new building is an archetype with added complexity. The project sets up an ambiguity between building structure and skin, absorbing the vernacular of the ferry boats and bridges with the more familiar forms of the town. I know that the external expression of architecture, whether urban or rural, has the ability to generate great influence unconsciously over time. As one of the most interesting practices in Scotland, Reiach and Hall have laid out an example of a way of proceeding that will have some significance in time to come.

The work of Neil Gillespie, Design Director, Reiach and Hall, has probably a diversity of role and function atypical of most contemporary architects. In this short essay I would like to accept that as an established factor and focus on his work with artists. Primarily on the spaces where artists show their work, and in particular, the Collective Gallery, Edinburgh. It is apposite that these spaces are conceived and built without the notion of architectural pretension, or style.

*'Art needs space. But artists and architects often have wildly differing notions of what constitutes ideal exhibition space for art'. Although the discussion about buildings to house art is perhaps almost completely dominated by the architects' viewpoint'.<sup>1</sup>*

In Gillespie's practice, what he is doing is very different from the assertion above. Gillespie is carefully emphasising the conditions for dialogue, and within that process he is in a way reconstructing the relationship between the artist and the architect. He is on more than one level taking away architecture, to bring a 'Space for Art', not a space where the function of 'social' improvement, property value enhancement, etc, can often mean a melange of spatial confusion. A situation where, 'architecture became taxidermy'.<sup>2</sup> The nature of Gillespie's approach is integrative in terms which can be seen in the associations and influences of its genesis. From an early point an engagement with the spatial fundamentals was evident, 'the art of building' was accompanied by an 'absence of architecture'. Bringing the form closer to the aesthetic, rather than 'the decorated shed'. A general characteristic of Gillespie's work has been a paring a way layer by layer of the facade of form to leave in a visual resolve, a pertaining residue, which avoids the 'artificial' as the artist Ulrich Rückriem describes appositely, talking about his 'halls'.

*'I wouldn't like to refer to my halls as architecture at all. I'd rather talk about structures. To me, architecture sounds*

*too demanding and, on the other hand, it always makes me think of too much contrasting, artificial, unnecessary form. A structure is historically and locally oriented, built with the simplest, reliable materials and constructions that local craftsmen can master. A structure is so to speak, cleansed with architecture, I find that pleasant, in principle, for artistic room though it is the only attitude that I can accept.'<sup>3</sup>*

What is particularly interesting here, given the nature of Rückriem's work, is his use of 'local', which of course has a particular pertinence in Scotland. What Rückriem implies, within his statement is the idea of 'Local' has a qualitative emphasis. It has not been adulterated by a process of denial. The materials are in his case familiar, not directly 'local'. His tradition and I think Gillespie's, has still a continuity with locality, place and excellence, something which I believe has its roots in the idea of Baukunst (Building Art).<sup>4</sup> The ideal of a local architecture of quality, in say the products of the contemporary Basel school are articulated in a confident continuity with sources that for example that relate, to civic interpretations of a pooled ideological resource. In the Basel case they are Schmidt, Mayer, Taut and contemporary artists such Federle and Zaug.

These artists and 'Architects' have a keenly held notion of civic and intellectual identity, they are part, in their locality, of a European tradition of a creative polycentric, 'locality'. But when it comes to the imperative description of an 'acceptable local' architecture, local architecture in Scotland can only seen as a fundamental aspect of kitsch, a 'Blanket Conservation' of the vernacular. However the practical tradition interpreted as beyond style but as part of a Utopic/ Aspirant/Developed form, as is say, the Swiss model, is a far from alien prospect. The idea of this local identity developed through civics and a comparative reading, 'placed' here in Scotland as a contemporary civic one would be regarded with bewilderment, by what constitutes the architectural establishment.

Yet these ideas are no strangers to the Scottish city, look to the sources of Patrick Geddes, who regenerated

the utopic ideas of Thomas Reid, as much the scientist, the generalist philosopher, the developer, the aesthetician. He drew in Huxley, Kropotkin, Le Play, D'Arcy Thompson, and of course, the artists.

*'For vital effect, the whole has to be infused by a common idealism, at once artistic, philosophic, and social, and applied towards the enrichment of the city's life. through the diffusion of its past Heritage, and the appreciation of its opening Future.'*<sup>5</sup> This sums up his commitment to link past and future as a matter of course, and make this link in the context of art, philosophy, and society, (a truly "civic" context), not in the context of a commercialised "heritage industry".<sup>6</sup>

For most architects here the aspiration in making space for art is being able to interpret trends, eg. magazines or London orthodoxies. The 'featured' gallery architecture is designed to emphasise the 'feature', and cafe/bar, which was described by a recent gallery designer as the centre of the building. Yet Gillespie in his reading of the city and the gallery as a visual thought/dialogue point has implicitly brought to his form, a very Geddesian sense of civic dialogue. This is a natural interdisciplinary approach bringing the artist and architect together. The two developments in Edinburgh, Stills, the Collective, contrast effectively as art space against the architecture of other recent quotations. As they are in overall complex part of a street dialogue,<sup>7</sup> the feature is within an ambulatory experience, yet the glass Collective, revealingly and essentially of a prismatic-geometric form, particularly echoes a crystalline residue of memory, which invokes, perhaps, a flash of self reflection, which replaces and then relocates perceptions of space, a self reflection that invokes, the potential, bringing the sharing of reflection, an exteriorisation of the internal, that also engages within the space with yet another layer of perception and mirroring, the art. This brings a consideration of the reflective to the local, and focus to the contemporary relationship between works of art and space, in this case, the street, the natural civic expression of space. Within this, the crystalline encasement, 'space for art'. The primary concern of the artist is articulated

within the notion of 'building art', not an architecture of feature, but also in this context is an accreted form of layered reflection. This is a place where the polemical considerations of the artist can be contained within the dialogue space, in sense a neutrality. A friend of Gillespie's, the Japanese architect Shinichi Ogawa puts this very succinctly,

*'Architecture must be freed from all styles or concepts and be neutral. Existing styles or concepts alone are not enough to produce architectural space. By reassembling architecture on an abstract level liberated from architectural concepts or vocabularies, space becomes all things yet nothing, thereby acquiring greater freedom. Malevich's Suprematism suggested an absolute non-representationality that transcended even abstract painting. It did not recreate anything; at the same time, it presented an unlimited space and universe. It provided a place where space in a liberated condition was generated. Architecture did not assert itself as a thing. Space itself was neutral, and the diverse flows of things and information were unimpeded. The convertibility of functions and forms permits the simultaneous development and parallel coexistence of all things and a high degree of choice. A neutral space becomes the foundation promoting the exchange of human thoughts, emotions and actions and a horizon generating diverse interpretations, view points and functions'.*<sup>8</sup>

This neutrality, as referred to above, infers a reflective role in its engagement with civics. In 1997, through Gillespie's urbanist interests, an exhibition of Thomas Struth's photographs was held at Reiach and Hall. This project presented in a fascinating perspective the architect looking at cities through the eyes of another. These interests refer to the centrality of 'seeing'. This again fits this mode or role in reconstructing the form of the built in the wider context of civics. There is a very strong reflection in Struth's work of Gillespie's fascination for the 'mirroring' of 'visual thinking'.

Yet this place of seeing is a space, and in Struth's work it is a modern one and a photographic one. It reflects