Drawing the Impossible — The Role of Architectural Drawing in the Production of Meaning in Social Space.

Luke Tipene
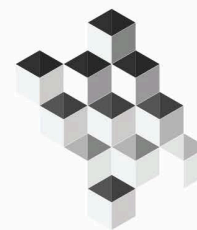
/////////////////////////

005

Drawing the Impossible —
The Role of Architectural Drawing
in the Production of Meaning in
Social Space.

Luke Tipene
90—107

This pictorial essay reflects on a unique category of

architectural drawing that depicts spaces that *cannot*

physically exist. It suggests that this specific mode of

drawing plays a significant role in the production of

meaning in social space through depicting ephemeral

characteristics of our social relations.

This argument is discussed in relation to Michel Foucault's

theoretical allegory of the heterotopic mirror, and

illustrated through accompanying images of the drawing

project *The Virtual Relations* (2009). This project used the

methodology of "drawing the impossible" with Henri

Lefebvre's theory for the production of space to explore

ephemeral conditions of social interaction in the domestic

interior as five spatial descriptions.

#Architectural Drawing

#Heterotopia

#Social Space

Piranesi

Lerup

Drawing and thinking

Architectural drawing generally operates in one of two modes; either as a tool to represent what *does* exist, or as a design device to demonstrate what *can* exist. However, there is a third mode of drawing that transgresses what *does* and what *can* exist, to depict that which *cannot*. Such drawings are rare and generally seen as adjacent to design practice, though when considered in relation to Michel Foucault's theoretical allegory of the *heterotopic mirror*, they demonstrate a unique affordance of the medium of drawing to inform our understanding of social space. By depicting spaces that are wilfully unbuildable, such drawings sustain and reflect ephemeral characteristics of our space of relations, enabling viewers to address their own understanding of social space through participating in the production of meaning in the image. The result of which are drawings that deconstruct formal aesthetics to create a spatial discourse on "*states of being* rather than on the physical reality of use" (Lerup 1987, 9).

Perhaps the most identifiable example of this mode of drawing is the *Le Carceri d'invenzione* [*Imaginary Prisons*] (1745-61) portfolio by the architect Giovanni Battista Piranesi. These difficult and bleak drawings go beyond simple depictions of imaginary architectural space to include elements of optical illusion. Such elements make these depictions unbuildable outside the artifice of drawing by including paradoxical forms, parallel scales, and the deliberate obscuration of linear perspective. Such elements deny the plausible consideration of these drawings as depictions of real space. Instead they confront us as a type of unknowable space made from a "tangle of things that questions one another's meaning" (Tafuri 1987, 50).

A more recent example of this mode of drawing is Lars Lerup's *Love/House* (1987). This episodic depiction of the fate of two lovers demonstrates unbuildable space through the metamorphosis of built form across twenty-six drawings that disregard physical limitations such as gravity and structural logic (Lerup 1987, 59-80).[1] Like Piranesi's prisons, Lerup's *Love/House* removes the architectural drawing from an analogous relationship to buildable space. The results are an assemblage of visual approximations of *Love/House* that rearrange, add or omit spatial elements based on the social interactions between its clients, the lovers.

These uniquely unbuildable depictions of space by Piranesi and Lerup correlate with Foucault's theoretical allegory of the heterotopic mirror discussed in his published lecture, *Of Other Spaces* (1986).[2] Foucault describes heterotopias as places that are "outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality" (Foucault 1986, 24). Like the drawings, Foucault explains heterotopias as consisting of a duality that configures the *unreal* with the *locatable*; a process that he describes in detail through an allegory of his interaction with a mirror (1986, 24).

Foucault begins by describing the characteristics of the mirror that correlate with heterotopia's other, *utopia*. He suggests that the space of reflection within the mirror is like a utopia in that it is "a placeless place" (1986, 24). In a similar way, he describes utopias as "fundamentally unreal spaces" (1986, 24) because they are representations of "society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down" (1986, 24). This description of utopias as only perfect (*eu-topian*) or the inverse (*dystopian*) demonstrates the limitations of such idealisations; like the space of reflection in the mirror, utopias are unreal and bare an inevitable distance to reality.

James J. Gibson discusses the same effect of idealised representation in drawing. He suggests drawings that attempt to perfectly depict the observable world prevent any reliable impression of reality (Gibson 1978, 231). He describes this as
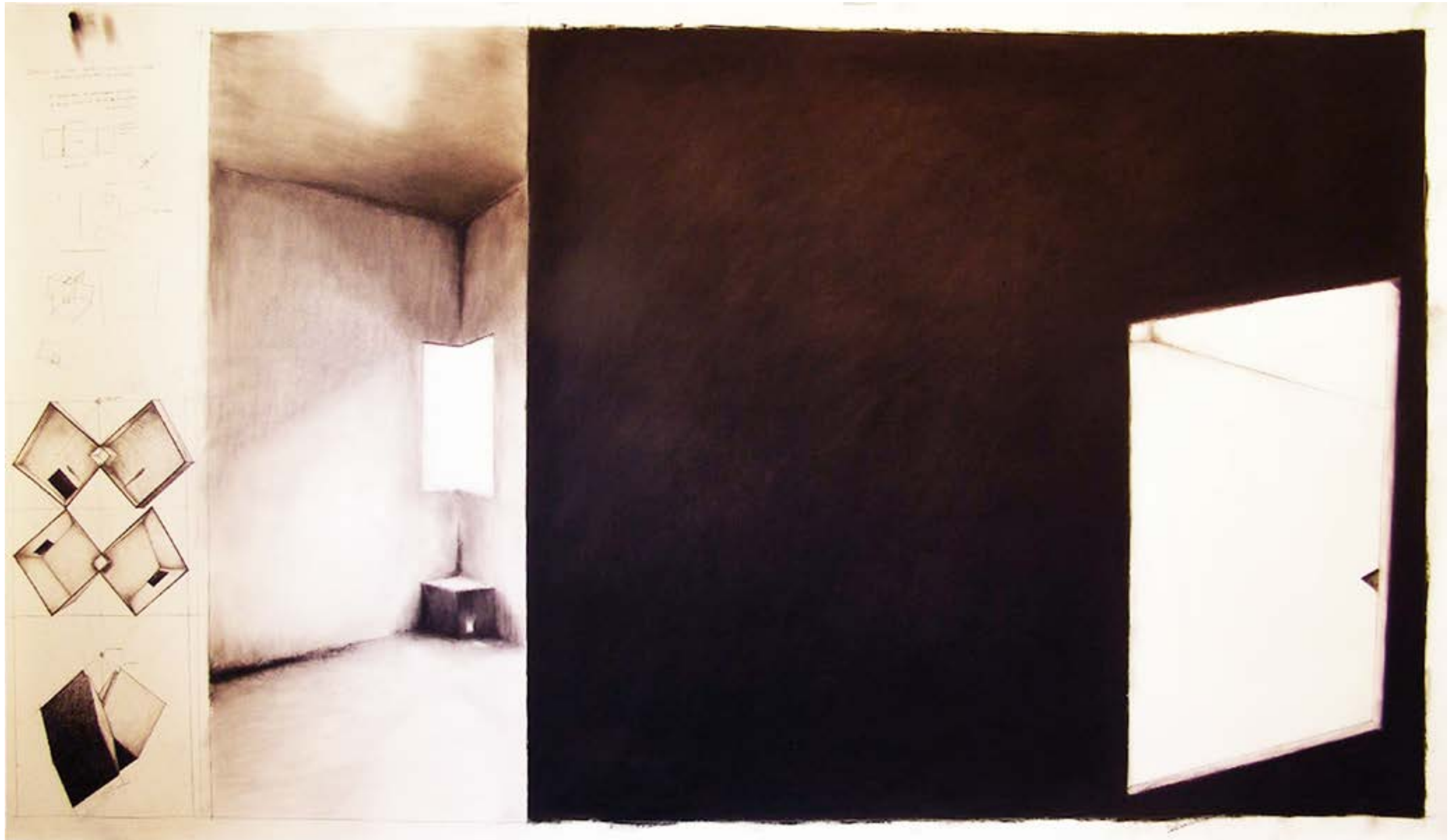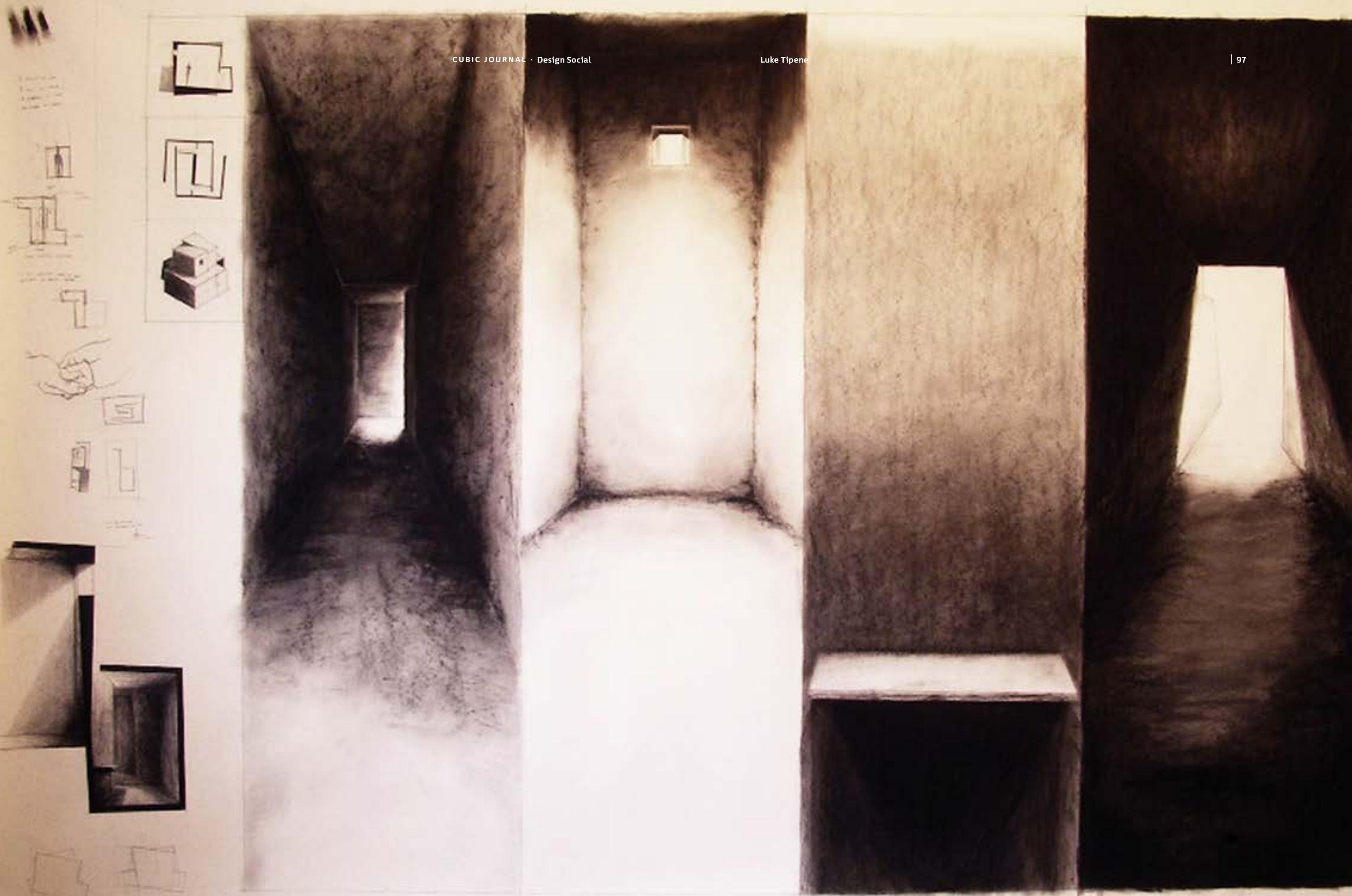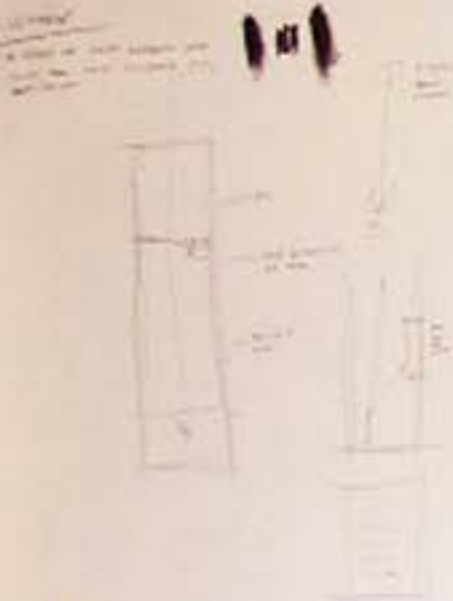
Figure 1 (page 90 - 91): Mapping Social Interactions from the Domestic Interior (2009). Ink on paper (originally 600 x 800mm). Source: *Luke Tipene*.

Figure 2 (pages 92 - 93): Curiosity (2009)—A space where each inhabitant perceives the other through a third space that neither can enter. Soot and graphite on paper (originally 1600 x 2800mm). Source: *Luke Tipene.*

Figure 3 (pages 94 -95): Intimacy—A space for witnessing the other inhabitant's solitude. Soot and graphite on paper (originally 1600 x 3000mm). Source: *Luke Tipene.*

Figure 4 (pages 96 -97): Guilt—enables inescapable hegemonic perception of one inhabitant over the other. Soot and graphite on paper (originally 1600 x 2800mm). Source: *Luke Tipene.*

Figure 5 (pages 98 -99): Trust – The only space where each inhabitant can meet freely. Soot and graphite on paper (originally 1600 x 2500mm). Source: *Luke Tipene.*

Figure 6 (this page): Infatuation – A space that enables one inhabitant to view oneself covertly viewing the other. Soot and graphite on paper (originally 1600 x 1200mm). Source: *Luke Tipene.*

the fallacy of representation in which drawings occlude our experience of reality by reducing it to linear perspective (1978, 231-2), or a process that keeps what is real at a distance from what is seen. For Gibson, like Foucault's definition of utopias, idealised representations forever remain unreal because they do not engage in the meaning of real things.

Moving from his definition of the *utopia* to his conceptualisation of the *heterotopia,* Foucault returns to the allegory of the mirror. He states that in addition to its unreal space of reflection, the mirror is also a real site that "does exist in reality" (Foucault 1986, 24). In the same manner, Foucault suggests heterotopias are "real places […] that do exist"[3] (1986, 24), resulting in their ability to affect us through exerting "a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy" (1986, 24). Importantly, he suggests that for this *counteractive* mechanism to affect us, like the mirror, heterotopias must be simultaneously experienced as both real entities and unreal reflections (1986, 24). For Foucault, this non-hegemonic interface of these two depictions is central to the concept and agency of the heterotopia.

Returning to Gibson, he parallels this duality of the heterotopia in his description of how we experience drawings (Gibson 1978, 231). He suggests that like Foucault's mirror, drawings are simultaneously experienced as both "surface and scene", or image and space[4] (1978, 231). The result of which is a dual perception when viewing drawings as real images that affect us through counteraction and as unreal spaces of reflection that gives the counteraction meaning.

Considering drawings in this way, perfected depictions of the observable world can be described as attempts to favour unreal spaces over real images. The result of which are idealised representations that provide little "counteraction on

the position I occupy" (Foucault 1986, 24) because they locate "the observer in a virtual environment" (Gibson 1978, 232). Adversely, drawings that engage in optical illusion and depict unbuildable space break the drawings ability to convincingly enact such perfected representations. They result in drawings that we experience as real images that use counteraction to affect us through reflecting the unreal qualities that make space meaningful.

By depicting purposely unbuildable space, such drawings give agency to real but ephemeral characteristics of our social experience. In the case of Piranesi's work, this results in spatial depictions that are "a systematic criticism of the concept of place" (Tafuri 1987, 27). In the case of Lerup's work, it results in spatial descriptions that "attempt to arrest or disrupt the unspoken and unheard 'family narrative' written in the spaces of the house" (Biln 1995, 40). These drawings become sites to explore the meaning of such unbuildable spatial qualities and question unseen social-spatial practices.

Lerup's drawings suggest how such agency takes hold in our cultural imagination. Prior to his development of the *Love/House*, Lerup defined his approach to design as "interactionist" (Lerup 1977, 19), suggesting that the meaning of architecture is unfinished in its built form and instead is constantly produced through participatory engagement in our social space. His *Love/House* drawings appear to embody the same view. Drawn to articulate a critical reflection on the American domestic interior, these depictions of the relational experience of the lovers leave the house unfinished. Described by John Biln as a "somatic suture" (Biln 1995, 60-65), these metamorphic and unbuildable representations compel the viewer to actively participate in the construction of their meaning (1995, 60-65). A point articulated by Lerup himself when suggesting that the clients of *Love/House*, the lovers themselves, reflect a particular relational moment that we have all experienced at one point in our lives. (Lerup 1987, 18).

Manfredo Tafuri describes a similar relationship with the unfinished in Piranesi's unbuildable prisons. Paraphrasing May Skeler, he suggests the "disintegration of the coherence of structure" in the drawing results in "the spectator to recompose laboriously the spatial distortions, to reconnect the fragments of a puzzle that proves to be, in the end, unsolvable" (Tafuri 1987, 26). Tafuri appears to describe this interactive process as the central mechanism of Piranesi's work, resulting in "infinite dialectics" (1987, 53), which democratise the production of meaning in the drawing by opening it to "unforeseen possibilities of intervention into the form of the human environment" (1987, 46). The counteractive agency of these drawings to affect our understanding of social space is evident through their significant influence on architecture, art, stage design, cinema, literature and critical theory since its completion in 1761 (Roncato 2007, 6; Tafuri 1987, 39). By remaining unfinished, or even "unfinishable", these drawings provide an inexhaustible site to reflect on the unbuildable qualities of the human condition that make space meaningful.

The ability of this third mode of drawing to participate in dialectics on the meaning of social space is the premise of the drawing portfolio *Virtual Relations* (2009). This project consists of a drawing study of social interactions that routinely occur in domestic space but are afforded little attention in architectural design due to their ephemerality. They include: *curiosity, intimacy, guilt, trust* and *infatuation* (fig.2-6 respectively). These social interactions were mapped from a domestic interior to establish the unseen spatial characteristics of each type of engagement (fig.1). Based on the work of Piranesi and Lerup, this project used the unique affordance of drawing to sustain and reflect the unbuildable qualities of each social interaction.

The central mechanism for translating these unseen social interactions into seen drawings was based on Henri Lefebvre's social theory of space. In his book *The Production of Space* (1991), Lefebvre

outlines a triadic structure as the foundation of social space involving an interrelationship of power (*Representations of Space*), built space (*Spatial Practice*), and social engagement (*Representational Spaces/ Spaces of Representation*[5]) (Lefebvre 1991, 33; 38-9). An essential premise of this triadic structure is the idea that space does not exist independently of human action but instead is a product of our relational engagements and subject to the "tension-filled" (Olivier 2011, 79) effects of power and people.

Based on this relational understanding of space, the core process of this project was to deconstruct a formal understanding of space as neutral and uniform. Each drawing required its own type of space to reflect the unseen, unique characteristics of each type of social interaction. Lefebvre's triadic structure was applied by establishing a relationship between *intention, space,* and *interactivity* in each drawing to reflect the properties of real social engagements. The result was a methodology of drawing where each was conceived for: a figure, embodying the intention of the engagement; a designed space that afforded the intentions of the figure; and an interaction with a second figure, embodying the effect of the engagement.

Where Piranesi's work separates the drawing from what is buildable to create dialectics on what is meaningful, *Virtual Relations* uses the same practice to create dialectics on the relational spaces we create by being together. Similarly, where Lerup guides this dialectic into the complex spatial diplomacy of courtship, *Virtual Relations* uses it to reflect the spatial moves afforded by each of the five social interactions: *Curiosity* (fig.2) depicts a space where each inhabitant perceives the other through a third space that neither can enter; *Intimacy* (fig.3) depicts a space for witnessing the other inhabitants' solitude; *Guilt* (fig.4) enables inescapable hegemonic perception of one inhabitant over the other; *Trust* (fig.5) is the only space where each inhabitant can meet freely; and *Infatuation* (fig.6) enables one inhabitant to view

oneself covertly viewing the other. The results are drawings that create dialectics on the meaning of social interactions by depicting the co-creation of space and relational engagement.

This portfolio was able to sustain this investigation into social spaces of the domestic interior by making full use of the unique attributes of the medium of drawing, as a site to explore the logic of ephemera. Such a mode of drawing, which removes expected outcomes and sustains unbuildable elements, offers a means to explore the unseen mechanisms of social processes and contribute to the infinite dialectics of meaning in social space.

Notes

1. *Love/House* consists of 49 drawings and model, made from 1981-84 and exhibited as *MATRIX 76* at the University Art Museum Berkley, in 1984 (BAMPFA 2017). A selection of these drawings were published in 1987 by the Canadian Centre for Architecture and distributed by The MIT Press in the book Planned Assault (Lerup 1987). The drawings of Love/House from Planned Assault are what this paper refers to.

2. Michel Foucault's original lecture was delivered in March, 1967. This paper uses Jay Miskowiec's published translation from 1986.

3. Full quote: "real places—places that do exist". See Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," trans. Jay Miskowiec *Diacritics 16* (1986): 24.

4. James J. Gibson originally used the terms "scene" and "surface" instead of space and image. Though space and image are implied in his original description "The information displayed is dual. It is both a scene and a surface, and the scene is paradoxically behind the surface." See James J. Gibson, "The Ecological Approach to the Visual Perception of Pictures," *Leonardo 11* (1978): 231.

5. Henri Lefebvre originally used the term *Representational spaces* in The Production of Space (See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 33.) though the term *spaces of representation* is a common substitute.

Bibliography

BAMPFA, "Lars Lerup MATRIX/BERKLEY 76," (2017): accessed July 22, 2017, Online.

Biln, John, "Perverse Coupling," *Assemblage 26* (1995): 38-69.

Foucault, Michel, "Of Other Spaces," translated by Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics 16* (1986): 22-27.

Gibson, James, "The Ecological Approach to the Visual Perception of Pictures," *Leonardo 11* (1978): 227-235.

Lerup, Lars, Planned Assaults: The Nofamily House, Love/House, Texas Zero (Montréal: Centre Canadien d'Architecture/Canadian Centre for Architecture; Cambridge: Distributed by MIT Press, 1987).

Lerup, Lars, *Building the Unfinished: Architecture and Human Action* (California: SAGE Publications, 1977).

Lefebvre, Henri, *The Production of Space*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

Olivier, Bert, "'Sustainable' architecture and the 'law' of the fourfold," *South African Journal of Art History 26* (2011): 74-84.

Roncato, Sergio, "Piranesi and the Infinite Prisons," *Spatial Vision 21* (2007): 3-18.

Tafuri, Manfredo, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth: Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s,* translated by Pellegrino d'Acierno and Robert Connolly (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987).

Bio

Luke Tipene is a Lecturer at the University of Technology Sydney, Faculty of Design Architecture and Building. His research focus includes theories of space, visual perception and architectural representation. Tipene investigates the role of drawing in the production of meaning in architecture. He has spoken at conferences, written on the subject of architectural drawing, and has run design drawing workshops throughout Australia.

Tipene maintains an active practice in drawing, curation and design. His work has been exhibited nationally and internationally and he has been involved in several artist-in-residence programs in Australia, the UK and Europe.