

Drawing as communicating vessels

An apologia (or not)

Neil Spiller

“Let us watch him with reverence as he sets side by side the burning gems, and smooths with soft sculpture and jasper pillars, that are to reflect a ceaseless sunshine, and rise into a cloudless sky: but not with less reverence let us stand by him, when with rough strength and hurried stroke, he smites an uncouth animation out of the rocks which he has torn from among the moss of the moorlands, and heaves into the darkened air the pile of iron buttresses and rugged wall, instinct with a work of imagination as wild and wayward as the Northern Sea; creations of ungainly shape and rigid limb, but full of wolfish life, fierce as the winds that beat and changeful as the clouds that shape them”.

John Ruskin, *The Nature of Gothic*, *The Stones of Venice*

Fig 1: Genetic Gazebo. Image by Neil Spiller, 2005.

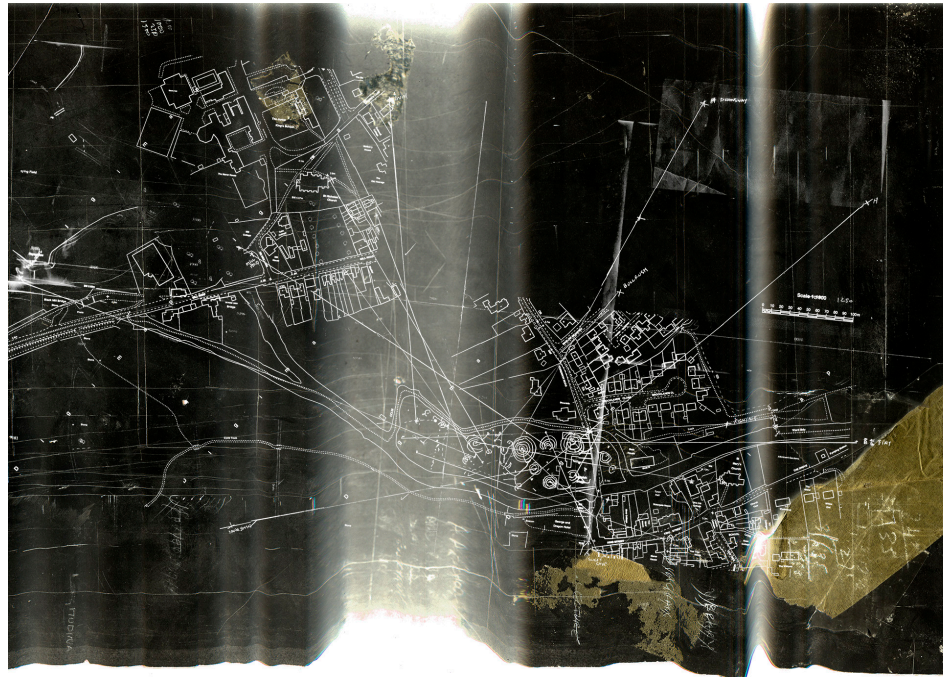
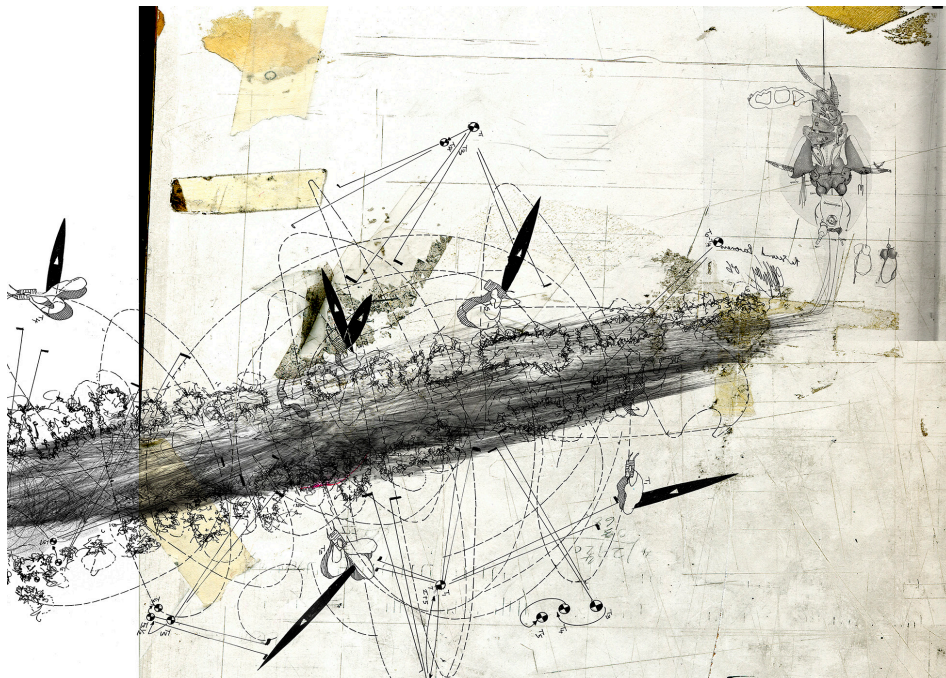


Fig 2: Site Plan. Image by Neil Spiller, 2008.

Fig 3: Baronesses of Filaments. Image by Neil Spiller, 2008.



As I get older, I have taken to reassessing my own creative output, its significance, its rigour and hopefully, its far-sighted vision. I have seen this issue of Scroope as an opportunity to further explore some of my past and present works in terms of their imperatives, themes and emphases.

I have always admired architectural theoretical projects that were long term, that were open ended and were speculative. Such projects include Mike Webb's Temple Island, Ben Nicholson's Appliance and Loaf Houses and Daniel Libeskind's Micromegas, Chamber Works and Theatrum Mundi – projects not born out of the financial expediency of traditional practice but full of the prima materia of architecture. Communicating Vessels was to be my contribution to this cannon of work; it was started in 1998 and is running to this day. Every thing I have drawn and designed in the last twenty years is part of this project; it now consists of approximately a thousand drawings and thousands of words of text.

It is a rumination on the impact of 21st Century technology on architectural space and materiality. It is also a personal memory theatre, a surreal contemplation on the house/garden dialectic in the contemporary world and a meditation on reflexive space and augmented reality. The project re-examines traditional paradigms and elements of design such as the house, the gazebo, the garden shed, walled garden, bird bath, entrance gates, riverside seats, love seats, vistas, sculptures, fountains, topiary and outside grown rooms among many other objects and spaces. It redesigns them, electronically connects them, explores their virtual and actual materiality, and their cultural and mnemonic importance, and reassesses them in the wake of the impact of advanced technology and the surreal protocols of contemporary architectural design in the twenty-first century. The project initially was conceived as a set of objects set in a psychogeography landscape that resonated with my youth- a very small island in the River Stour, two and a half miles outside Canterbury in Kent, near which I was brought up. So it is an island of memories, of hot sunshine bicycle rides, burgeoning sexuality, secret underage beers and illicit 70's liaisons. The site is simultaneously there geographically and in my memory.

As I have written before, “The Island of Vessels (Communicating Vessels) is a huge chunking engine, a communicating field, full of witchery and sexuality. Its neurotic things are ‘Pataphysically enabled and surrealistically primed. The island’s geography is cyborgian and always teetering on the edge of chaos. Its groves and glades are haunted by ghosts, some impish like Alfred Jarry, some nude on staircases, some with Dalinian moustaches and some muttering about defecating toads. On the island lives a Professor- a mad man, an idiot savant or a genius- perhaps all three. The Professor is attempting to work out the shock of the new, its architectures and its desiring poetics. The Professor likes his things, they tell him where he’s been and where he is. He dwells in this world and builds in it everyday- without fail. He works at the intersection of art, architecture and science. He uses desire as a welding torch and the pen as a scalpel. Like Duchamp’s *Handler of Gravity*, he likes to surf on precarious and fleeting equilibriums.”¹ Initially the first ideas for the project were about the simultaneity of forms in different fields, and the embroidering of architectural space through various scales of technology. So the first phase of the *Communicating Vessels* was in developing surreal reflexive systems that utilized the virtual, the nano and the chance dynamics both within the site and further a field.

The assorted architectural tableaux’s are powered by mysterious Grease a nano-technological substance, highly flammable, yet created within desiring machines. Desire is the other great motive force in the island along with memory. The celebration of the marvelousness of desire fueled the Surrealists creative odyssey.

Another cathartic moment happened late in 2012 when my friend Lebbeus Woods died. Lebbeus had encouraged my work since first meeting him around 1990. I set about weaving my memories of Lebbeus into the *Communicating Vessels* and this resulted in *The Walled Garden for Lebbeus* and coincided with a massive outpouring of work that has further galvanized the *Vessels* project.

“Initially, there were only a couple of drawings of the Garden, over the past year; these have blossomed into a suite of about twenty-five or more. I wanted the Garden to channel all manner of architectural ambiances and make some familiar quotes, not only from my architectural lexicon, but also from Lebbeus’s, Aldo Rossi’s *Moderna Cemetery* and OMA’s *La Villette* Competition entry. October 30th was also the day Hurricane Sandy ripped through New York, where Lebbeus lived (this is not to suggest that the two events on the same day were connected). As the year has progressed a whole series of ideas have evolved in the work, mainly about the choreography of augmented reality and gravity gradients over time. I wanted the Garden to have another virtual side, a side that would augment the simple world of walled space, trees, conic forms and statues I had created. This I saw as a new area of architectural detailing, one barely explored by contemporary architects, I wanted the drawings to explore this juxtaposition of virtual and actual, of points of view, ghosts, light and black.”² The garden is presided over by a statue of Electra, the back of whose head is hollow, it is through this hollow if one’s head is placed within, one can see and hear a storm rising and abating, formed of augmented reality vectors.

The Garden has a frustum within it, consisting of an upper and lower chamber. The Upper chamber a

¹ Neil Spiller, *The Poetics of the Island of Vessels* in *Drawing Architecture*, ed. Neil Spiller, *Architectural Design*, Sept-Oct 2013, p.112-119

² Neil Spiller, *Detailing the walled Garden for Lebbeus*, in *Future Details of Architecture*, ed. Mark Garcia, *Architectural Design*, July- Aug 2014, p118-127



Fig 4: Walled Garder for Lebbeus. Image by Neil Spiller, 2013.

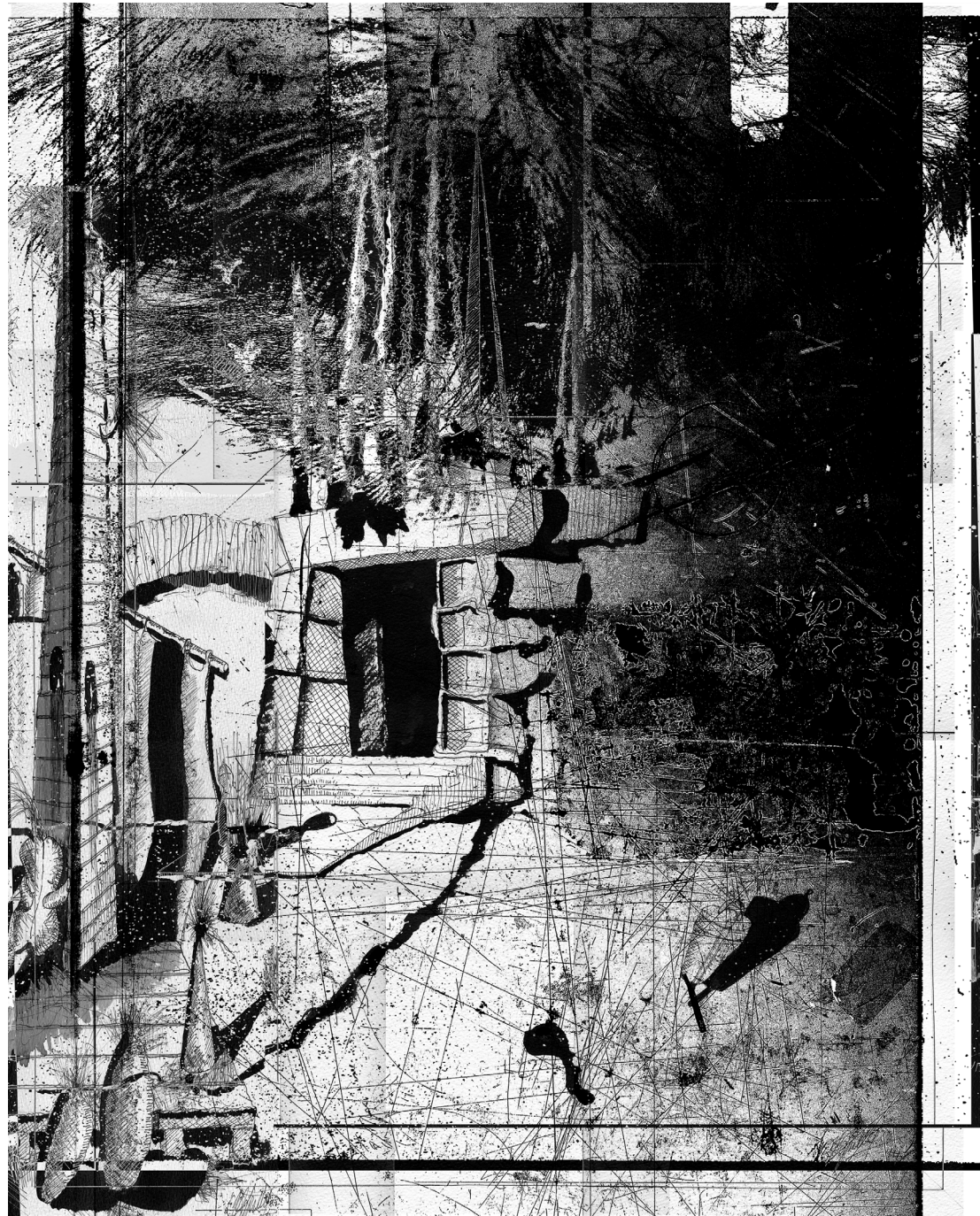


Fig 5: Upper chambers of Frustum. Image by Neil Spiller, 2014.

Fig 6 (following): Lower chambers of Frustum, Leda and Swan with grease residue. Image by Neil Spiller, 2014.

homage to Piranesi's Plate IX of the Carceri and Bocklin's Island of Death. The lower chamber reflexively linked to moving figures in the top chamber that dodge the storms, real and augmented as they pass over the open top of the frustum. This movement above activates grease below and it starts to create a surreal tableau of Leda and the Swan –another myth beloved by the Surrealists.

By 2015, it was clear that it was time to start to design the major piece of the constellation the Professor's house- it has become named the Longhouse. It is a prytaneion, a place of surreal banquets inhabited by ghosts, dreams, desires and mythic creatures. A Memory Palace of shifting relationships, of momentary fluttering's, cartographies and trajectories, where objects have the same accountability as people. It is a place of flame, of heat, of a rotten sun, of dusk and dawn, where the vertical is assimilated into the horizontal and where Modernism breaks down. The Longhouse is a highly reflexive and responsive series of spaces and relationships. The house choreographs itself and develops this daily choreography by reading its site; this site is a virtual changeling site.

The traditional lexicon of tactics that architects use to place their works in the context of specific sites-how they respond to the Genius Loci- has been radically augmented by a myriad of new, virtual and reflexive technologies. Changes are upon us; the vista has changed, is changing and constantly changes. Cyborgian geomorphology is a movable feast and here to stay. Permanent architectural context, material sympathies and synthesis, massing, phenomenological and anthropocentric sensitivities are now imbued with the accelerating timescales of virtual and chemical metamorphosis combined with the virtual choreography of chance. Positions of, and the nature of objects and architectures are conditioned by mixed ontologies, scopic regimes, numinous presences and reversible time. This reversible time stalks objects and disturbs their gentle entropy and peaceful rest. The vitality of architecture has increased a thousand-fold. To the twenty-first century agile architect, these architecturally disruptive technologies breathe new life into the language of architecture. The verbs of architecture are being recast.

Time based sensitivities are mixed in the cauldron of the virtual world, seen by augmented eyes enhanced by dimensions of chronological slippage, coalescing in a digital dance above and beyond the pragmatics of actuality. This is a house of augmented reality, nano enabled ghosts and mythic chimeras whose movements are cross-programmed with the houses sites both real and imagined.

The house interiors are yet to be fully designed this is my next task.

What drives some architects to make drawings/models of architectures that are clientless and therefore unbuilt or currently unbuildable? Firstly the commercial world of architecture is a world of value engineering, of committee consent and limited material palette – a world that is highly legislated and therefore often normative and often having lost its lifeblood – ARCHITECTURE. What is architecture and can it be held within a drawing/model as well as a building? Architecture is the "mother of all Arts." It is a synthesis of poetry, fine art, sculpture, it flows over time like music and its spaces have establishing vignettes, oscillate across the scales (from macro to micro) and they have denouement like film or prose. One could go on. Above all architecture is the manipulation of space – in all its manifestations. Space can be imagined and space can be graphically represented.

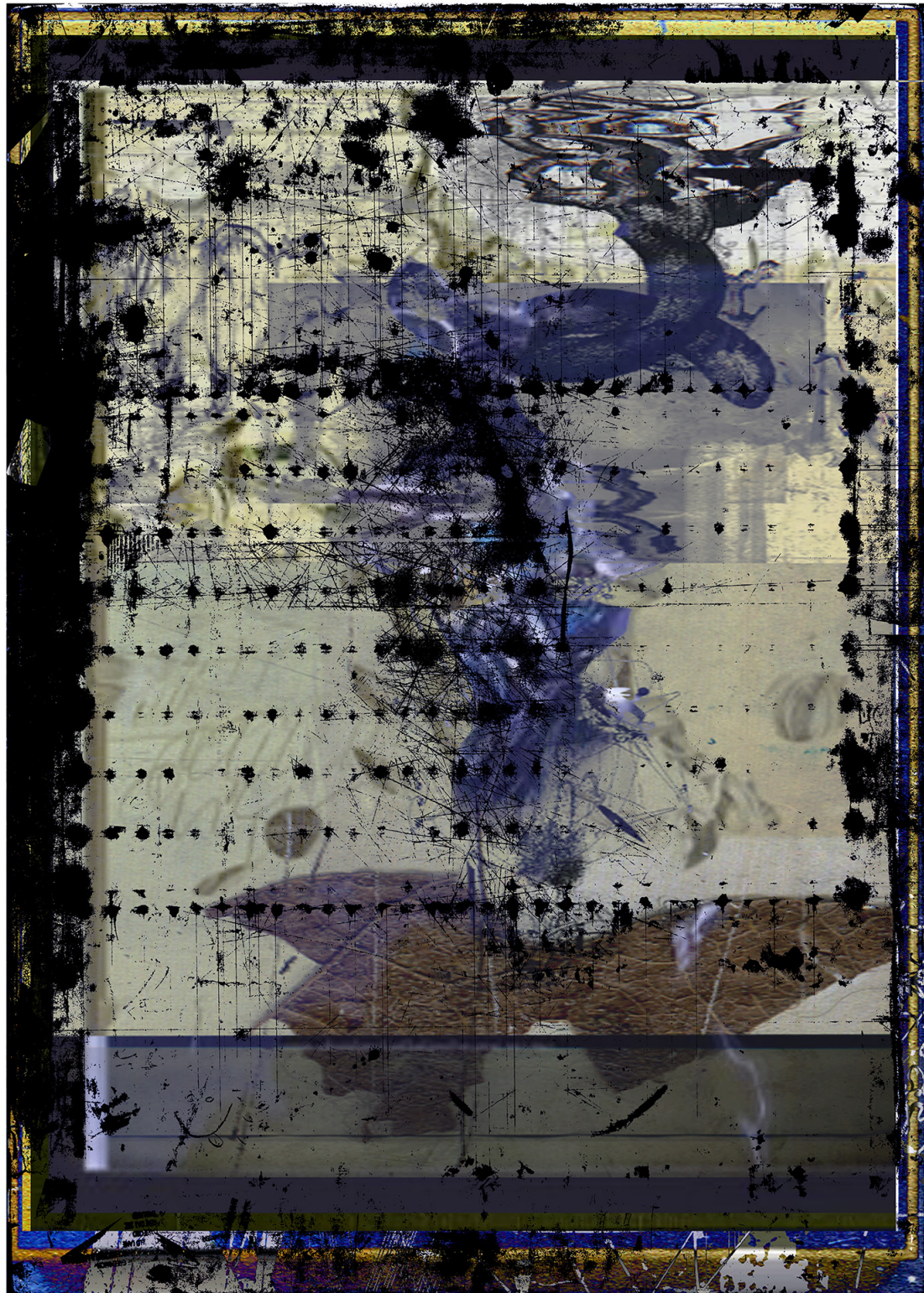




Fig 7 (left): Longhouse boxing match interior. Image by Neil Spiller, 2015.

Fig 8 (right): Longhouse Hectate both within and without. Image by Neil Spiller, 2015.

Indeed, as our world sails headlong into culturally, demographically, ecologically and technologically uncharted waters, we badly need our ability to speculate about the future of our discipline and its centrality to society. This is not utopian and it is not something that the prevailing capitalist mentality often encourages and this is shortsighted and could potentially cost us our whole discipline.

A good architectural drawing is about, on one level, what one leaves out. A very good architect over the years develops a series of personal protocols and idiosyncrasies that have connected histories and evolutionary metamorphosis from one drawing to the next. This is of course also true for buildings as much as it is true for drawings.

Our era will be seen as being responsible for the blossoming of the virtual word and the beginning of a sustainable world. We are here, now, to find and make positive outcomes to this conundrum! To achieve this we need to speculate to accumulate.

This is what I have done and what I will do, simultaneously my day job is making students see the same but different opportunities in this bizarre but beautiful world. All my work is connected in the massive Communicating Vessel of my mind. It's a life's work and I make no apologies for it! It's what architects should but seldom do!

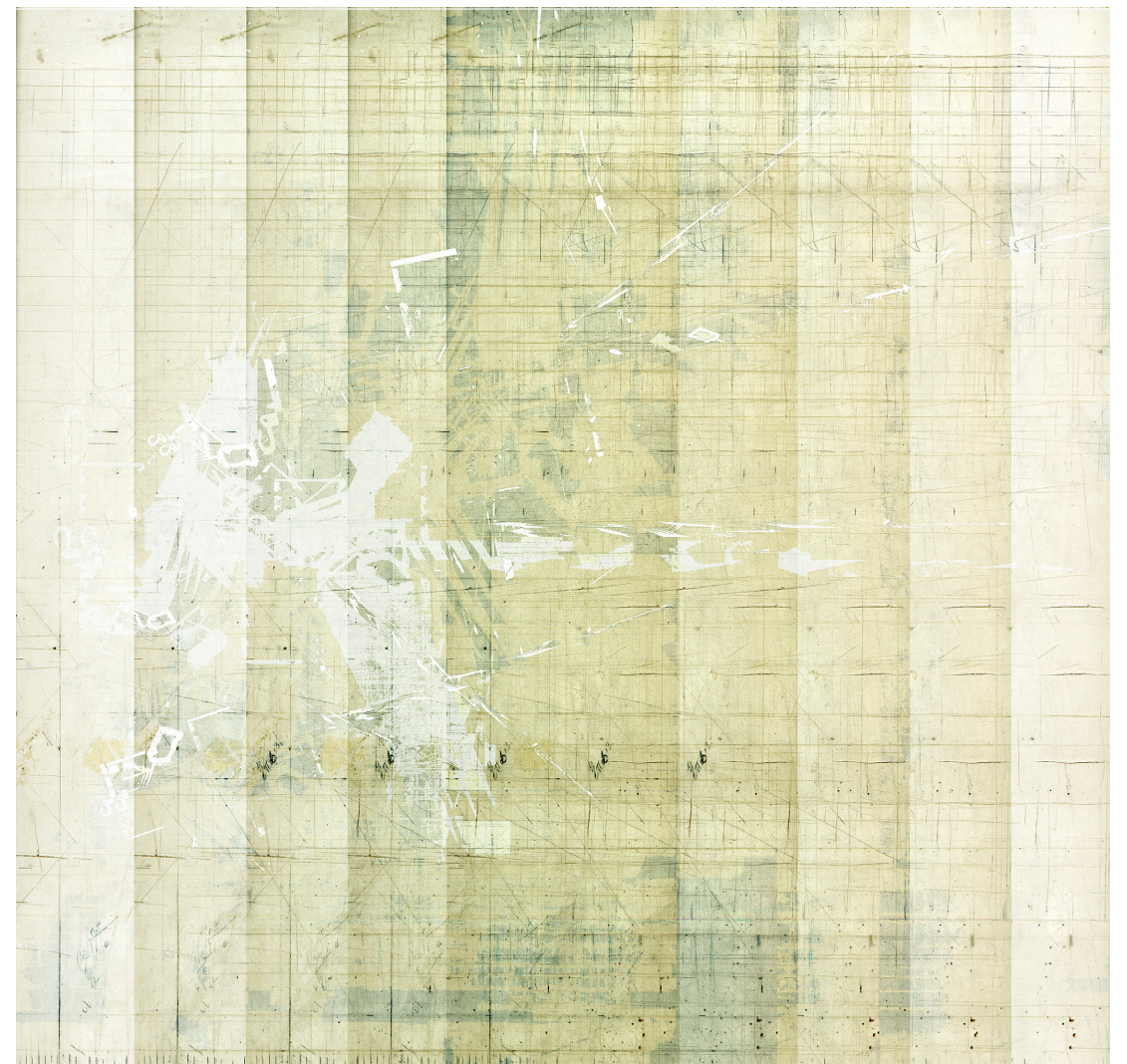


Fig 9: White plan, Longhouse. Image by Neil Spiller, 2015.