

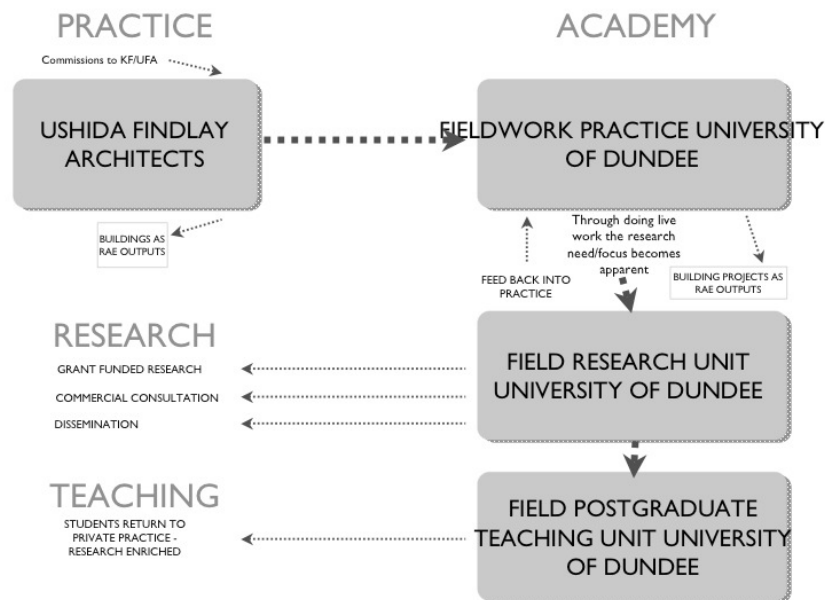
04: Key moments in research: transitions in practice and the Academy

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As far as the key moments in my career are concerned, I would say that what I have are key phases and a series of interlocking obsessions. With regard to spatial intelligence; I find I have different ways of seeing space and they all interlock. My struggle is always to make them coherent.

Sunand Prasad has said that research starts with curiosity, and I absolutely agree with that. The whole relationship between architecture as practice and architecture as research can be stated very simply: you start by doing something that interests you. It may be something that becomes an obsession. It is difficult to estimate just how much time developing an interest can take. In the process you think a lot about what you are doing, you reflect upon it, you try to capture it, you try to tell people about it, and you might try and do it again. Somebody else might try and do it again in a different way and do it better or do it differently, but it is like this unfolding of ideas and discussions. It can be like Chinese whispers, or exquisite corpses.

My career, is like a hopscotch between practice and the Academy (illustration 1), and one of the frustrations is that there is so much going on in one project that in the commercial world you cannot possibly capture it all or pass it on easily. I suppose that is what has attracted me to the Academy as well.



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Illustration 1: Kathryn Findlay's relationship between practice and research.

My first obsession developed when I was in my second year at the Architectural Association as a student of Leon van Schaik. I became very interested in primary ideas of space: the idea of reversal looked promising, where space is solid and solid is space. I also began to see architecture as landscape.

The first phase in my professional career was on graduation, when I went to Japan and worked with professional partner, Eisaku Ushida. We had a number of projects there. One of the first was the Truss Wall House (illustration 2).



Illustration 2: Ushida Findlay, Truss Wall House

This house was a technical brief from a client who had invented the Truss Wall system, i.e., a three-dimensional way of forming concrete. The interest in the material was its pliability, fluidity and lack of scale. My previous obsession returned, namely the reversal of solid and void and the framing of movement from something which is fluid and something that becomes frozen encapsulated the idea of movement in form. Through this construction method and its reinterpretation, we were able to capture movement in form. In addition, we developed an interest in the relationship between the digital and handcrafting. This was all done before the advent of computers and contemporary fluid software. At that time the method at our disposal involved drawing things in many slices. This experiment gave us an interest in an architecture that generates a question and creates a language. The language itself determines furniture and storage, openings and incorporated lighting. We realised that we followed rather than led and it was more about reading circumstances and informing materiality. This led on to another idea of materiality and transgression of the boundary between builder and designer. In Japan, the contract legalities are less strict so we were able to make things on site, and out of that came the idea of drawing spaces which we found that we had extracted in the design process. We developed a series of drawings called the “slimy drawings”, which were pre-digital and handcrafted.

At the same time we wanted to avoid being stuck in form-style and the idea of “the informal” grew in relevance to us. We became interested in how geometry can be a transformational device that allows something to be materialised and actualised in quite different ways. Things that would manifest themselves in a very different way became very interesting, as did the whole idea of transformation and interchange. The

approach allows a flexibility, possibly in the sense that Richard Blythe has talked about: the spatial intelligences and the context you choose. Which way do you choose to reinterpret something?

We then had a little project commissioned by Leon van Schaik at the Adelaide Festival in 2005. It was about the nature of landscapes and their cultural narratives. The dialogue between the reading and the inscription in a landscape became central to the project. We found ourselves researching and exploring a literature of different ways to see landscape, including the Aboriginal way of knowledge embedded in place.

I then went into academia and taught at Tokyo University. All the professors had research laboratories, which comprised mostly engineers doing research for the government, but I ended up with a Design Research Laboratory. I believe that the practice I did was my research, and so architecture became research. Travelling between Japan and England at that time, I became frustrated to realise that the Japanese were not interested in any aspects of sustainable design and I set about trying to find a way in which design language could instruct lay people to be able to read the thermal energy of the architecture. I wanted to make it function in a way which incorporated a new way of reading sustainable principles and a new approach to construction and to constructing the environment. The language of this building and its shape were derived from the sun's path, allowing energy in to heat up a thermal wall and thus the air in the winter, and the reverse in the summer.

SUBVERTING THE VERNACULAR

One important aspect of my design research is that it is not linear. I seem to hopscotch between different ways of seeing space. This became evident when we were asked to design a poolhouse in England. It was to be in the grounds of a Grade II listed building and the client wanted something very contemporary on the inside, very highly serviced, but which was also connected on the outside to their English garden (illustration 3).



Illustration 3: The pool house on site.

I proposed the idea of a thatched roof, and then became very interested in parallel vernacular and I researched the basis of the Japanese thatch. I realised that one of the earliest architectural details on the planet came about when early man placed earth on the top of the pitched roof ridge to stop dry grass flying away. The roots of the plants

became ties to the structure. We adapted this planted ridge detail by embedding plant boxes in the roof of the poolhouse, either side of the top light (illustration 4). I suppose this created a kind of slippage between the inside and the outside.



Illustration 4: the pool house

Following on from this, I am working on a new project that is now on site in Buckinghamshire. It connects in a slightly different way and demonstrates that digital design can inform even handcrafted traditional materials for the design of buildings. The fluid forms of the thatch can be morphed and mutated and moulded in a way reminiscent to the way I earlier used concrete in the Truss Wall House.

THE DOHA VILLA

Setting up a practice in the UK in 1998, we did some work in the Gulf. Playing around with the morphologies that we had come up with in the Truss Wall House, we were very interested in applying this idea in the work that we were doing in the Gulf, and in a more contemporary sense. We have always been interested in the envelope of a building, the language of a building, having many codes, a structural code and an environmental code, and really thinking about the cultural typology being in a climatic way attuned to the envelope, taking something that is contemporary but reinterpreting it in the Middle Eastern or the Gulf context. So we were playing with the same ideas and the same language as the Truss Wall House, but ten years further on. We were also still very interested in the relationship between virtual modelling, virtual understanding of space and testing it in the physical sense and, in that sense, evolving the building. It was a mixture of advanced technology and handcrafting.

PARALLEL LANDSCAPES

I have referred to our obsession in buildings as landscapes, though fluid landscapes, and the building being environmentally part of its landscape, parallel to it rather than juxtaposed with it. We reinterpreted the idea in a beach-house for the Queen of Qatar. She wanted a building that was part of its desert landscape, and so this sort of

transformational geometry came into play. Transformational geometry also became the vehicle for the design of a costume museum, incorporated with an old fort in the centre of Doha, in Qatar (illustration 5). The earlier idea of reversing solid and void is something that was transformed by and incorporated the Islamic geometry of that culture. We devised an architectural language that could, in a different way, reverse solid and void: we filled the space with a field of vertical rods, and the points of the rods embraced the geometries of Islam. These rods could be sometimes structure, sometimes servicing rods, and sometimes exhibition walls and divisions.



Illustration 5: Costume museum, Qatar

The issue with all this was how to capture the design research and make it useful to someone else, when in the commercial world it is usually dissipated in the dispersal of a design team at the end of a project. Consequently, at the University of Dundee I have developed a model where practice is part of a research culture. I bring my Ushida Findlay work into the university practice where it is developed as a live project first and strands of exploration and research second, so that a group can take different aspects of the design and develop it as individual postgraduate research projects or take it through into commercial collaboration.