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# Site-Seeing: Constructing the 'Creative Survey'

Carolyn Butterworth, Sam Vardy

This paper explores the role the site survey could play in an architectural praxis, where emphasis is placed upon a participatory user. Even though the profession increasingly accepts that architecture is a relational construct rather than an object-based discipline, the site survey remains intransigent. New working practices are emerging that transform the later stages of the design process in architecture, through the creative participation of users, but the site survey remains unchanged, characterised by its focus on the physical and its abstraction from the user. We discuss in detail the limitations of the normative site survey model and propose, with examples from our own work, the use of techniques from relational art practice that offer an alternate 'creative survey' model, which provokes new and potent relationships between site, user and architect.

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In this essay we consider the role of the normative site survey in architectural practice, analysing its limitations and suggesting how to overcome them through the application of techniques from art practice. We propose that the use of these techniques can transform the normative site survey model into a useful propositional tool for participatory architectural design.

Our interest in site surveys is a product of our backgrounds in both mainstream practice and academic teaching and research. From practice we have first-hand knowledge of the normative model of the site survey, where we have found it to be unnecessarily limited in both its execution and its application. From our teaching and research we have learnt techniques from art practice, which can transform the site survey into a more effective and creative tool. This essay outlines the perceived limitations of the normative site survey and describes experiments with a more provocative form of site survey, which can yield far greater insight and engagement than is usually the case.

The aim of this essay, therefore, is to make the case for an alternate site survey, one which goes beyond the normative model and expands the idea of a survey to cover not just the site but also the programme and the user. This alternate site survey is a propositional and transformative tool with which architects and users can explore and test possibilities for the use of the site and the future building. It is important to state that we see this as an 'alternate' site survey, not an 'alternative' site survey. While we argue that the normative site survey may be limited, we firmly believe that it is by no means useless. We propose an alternate form of site survey to augment and complement the normative model, not to replace it. In this paper we differentiate the alternate survey from the normative site survey by calling it the 'creative survey'.

In normative practice, the site survey appears in Stages A and B at the beginning of the RIBA's Stages of Work. The aim of the site survey is to enable the architect to gain an understanding of the site. But what is meant by the site and what kind of understanding is gained? The majority of architectural projects start with a red line on a map. The client body, having agreed on the extent of the red line, hand over this map to the architect and so identify the 'site'. In so doing, the site is defined by its physicality, its perceived vacancy and its difference from what is outside the red line. The architect now has an area of investigation to which they can apply the long-established methodology, which is the 'site survey' and it is this that defines the architect's understanding of the site.

The site survey is a closely defined set of information gathered by the application of standard tools. The list of inclusions for a site survey, as defined by The Architect's Job Book,[1] comprises of only physical characteristics and the given format of the survey is limited to plans,

[1] Sarah Lupton, *The Architect's Job Book, 7th Edition* (London: RIBA Publishing, 2000).

sections and elevations. Drawings and the secondary tools of the site survey, images and data in various forms, all become what Jonathan Hill calls the 'tools of abstraction'.[2] The abstraction offered by drawings is especially powerful because of the importance placed on them by the architectural profession. Writing on architectural drawings in general, Lefebvre states:

> Within the spatial practice of modern society, the architect ensconces himself in his own space. He has a *representation of this space*, one which is bound to graphic elements [...] this *conceived* space is thought by those who make it to be *true*.[3]

The site survey abstracts the site so successfully that once completed it can sit in a folder on the architect's laptop, and for the architect, this representation of the physical reality of the site *becomes* the site for the purposes of the design. Lefebvre's choice of the phrase, 'the architect ensconces himself', is telling; the site survey becomes a place to nestle, to settle securely, safe in the knowledge that the site survey is 'true'. The real site may seldom be visited again. In truth it may be avoided, since there is always a risk that it might have changed since it was surveyed. Yet, the site survey is constantly referred to, and in effect, replaces the site. This codified, abstracted and fixed version of the site carries enormous weight in the determination of the parameters of the architecture that follows.

The site survey's ambition to be comprehensive is perhaps its essential limiting characteristic. The process does not acknowledge the abstracted nature of the information that it produces nor does it recognise the absence of other information that it has not gathered. Such limitations are not considered in the adoption of the site survey as signifier of the site. This adoption goes so far, in fact, as to obliterate the site so that we reach the paradoxical situation where the map is indeed the territory; the site survey has become the site.

So, on completion of the site survey, how can we now characterise the architect's understanding of the site? According to Barthes, 'there is no drawing, no matter how exact, whose very exactitude is not turned into a style',[4] and so it is the case with the survey drawings. The architect relies upon their exactitude without considering the artifice deployed in their production. The survey describes only a limited set of characteristics of the site, that is, those that are deemed useful in the imminent design of the building. These are the measurable aspects of the site's physical, socio-political and cultural characteristics, and of these it is the physical characteristics of the site which are given primacy. Giving such value to the physical, by extension, engenders an understanding of architecture as a mostly physical discipline; the conception of architecture as object. By focussing almost entirely on the physical the site survey establishes a

2 Jonathan Hill, *Actions of Architecture: Architects and Creative Users* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 25.

3 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publishing, 1991), p. 361.

4 Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, (London: Fontana Press, 1977), p. 17.

context in which the design process then takes place, a context which in the main ignores contingency, temporality and happenstance.

So, to summarise, the normative site survey is limited both by the reductive nature of its remit and also by the levels of abstraction integral to its communication. Its sole audience is the architect who is predisposed to forget the actual site with all its idiosyncrasies and happy to locate their design on, as it were, the site survey. This closed circuit has no capacity to incorporate information from existing and future users and sets up an object-based process of design, which will continue to operate at a high level of abstraction.

The normative site survey springs from and reinforces an architecture which prioritises the object. However, we recognise a very different type of architecture emerging, influenced both by critical architectural discourse and by changes in client expectations. There is a shift away from the modernist preoccupation with architecture as an object-based discipline towards the notion that architecture is a relational construct, where 'architectural design process is not an activity that leads to the making of a product, but is rather the site of the work itself'.[5] This development is influenced by recent critical discourse on art, notably the theory of 'relational aesthetics', by Nicolas Bourriaud. Bourriaud's contention that 'the contemporary artwork's form is spreading out from its material form: it is a linking element, a principle of dynamic agglutination'[6] seems applicable to recent developments in contemporary architecture. This theoretical shift towards a 'relational architecture' is compounded by the more prosaic influence of funding requirements. Clients of publicly funded buildings increasingly expect architects to demonstrate community engagement in their design process and there is 'an unequivocal acceptance of participation as a better way of doing things'.[7] The result of this being that normative practice has had to redefine its relationship with the user, so that even the most conventional of practices will have had some experience of a public consultation exercise. Our experience from practice indicates to us that public consultation is often cursory, and tends to be neither creative nor useful and sometimes may even be harmful. Influenced by critical art theory a few practices are developing a relational praxis, which aims to construct 'a productive realm in which both architect and user enact reciprocal transactions between the simple realities and the highest dreams',[8] but even these, we feel, do not exploit the full creative potential of the site survey.

It may seem that of all the stages of an architectural project, the site survey is the least conducive to the inclusion of public participation. Remember Lefebvre's description of the architect nestling into their representation of the world, forgetting reality and regarding what they have produced as 'true'? Despite relational shifts in other areas of the design process, the relationship that the architect has with the site survey is still one

5 Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between*, (London and New York: I. B Tauris, 2006), p. 157.

6 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods, (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2000), p. 20.

7 Jeremy Till, 'The Negotiation of Hope', in Peter Blundell Jones, Doina Petrescu, Jeremy Till, (eds.), *Architecture and Participation*, (London: Spon Press, 2005), p. 24.

8 Jeremy Till, 'Architecture of the Impure Community', in Jonathan Hill (ed.), *Occupying Architecture: Between the Architect and the User*, (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 74.

of possession. The site survey is a precious object, an indicator of the architect being chosen by the client, who has in effect 'given' them the site, and now the architect alone understands it. The last thing the architect wants is for other people to spoil it. Lefebvre describes the term 'user' as having something 'vaguely suspect'[9] about it, a suspicion we cannot help feeling most architects still share. Jonathan Hill points out that in current practice 'the user is a threat to the architect because the user's actions may undermine the architect's claim to be the sole author of architecture',[10] and the last bastion of that sole authorship is the site survey. Whilst the overall practice of architecture shifts to become a more relational praxis, the normative site survey remains intact and unquestioned. We suggest, however, that alternate models of site survey are being offered from outside the profession by some artists, as the following example demonstrates.

Fig. 1. *The Singing Ringing Tree*, Crown Point, Burnley by Tonkin Liu. Photo: Carolyn Butterworth.

*The Singing Ringing Tree* in Burnley, East Lancashire has recently been awarded an RIBA National Award, to the great consternation of many in the architectural establishment who struggle to see how a piece of sculpture can win an architecture award. Responding to the criticism, Greg Penoyre, head of the awards jury, described *The Singing Ringing Tree* as an 'artefact' which 'has a complex, many-headed client and funding background, and importantly is bringing about significant community involvement and has received local support'[11]. The implication being that although in isolation the piece is more likely to be identified as sculpture, when assessed as part of a process, it is architecture. This is a radical decision for the RIBA to make. As far as we know this is the first time an RIBA Award has been given to a project where the process of its inception and its potential effects after completion are material to its perceived success as architecture. In contrast to the vast majority of awards, which

9 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 362.

10 Hill, *Actions of Architecture*, p. 3.

11 Greg Penoyre and George Ferguson, 'Should sculpture be allowed to win an RIBA award?', *Building Design* (29/6/2007); www.bdonline.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=427&storycode=3090361, [accessed 9 Dec 2007].

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are given to buildings in isolation, this award has been given to an amalgamation of built form, relationships and processes. Singled out for special praise was the participation of local school children in a series of events led by artists. We would describe these as 'creative surveys'.

It is interesting to see how the two disciplines of art and architecture converge and separate in the production of the *Singing Ringing Tree*. It was designed by architects Tonkin Liu and commissioned by the public arts organisation, Mid-Pennines Arts. While the architects progressed the design of the sculpture, the client organised a series of events to raise awareness of the project and its site. It is this component of the design process that we wish to discuss here because it is these events that are, in our opinion, 'creative surveys'. As an example we shall look at the Flag-Flying day held on the site of the *Singing Ringing Tree*.

Fig. 2. Flag Flying Day on the future site of *The Singing Ringing Tree*, Crown Point, Burnley. Photo: Nigel Hillier on behalf of Mid-Pennine Arts.

To maximise its visibility from Burnley, Gayle Knight from Mid-Pennine Arts organised an artist-led event, which could 'serve a technical purpose but also encourage ownership of the site for the children involved.'[12] Artists and school children made flags which they waved furiously on the hilltop site, Crown Point, while down in Burnley other children recorded whether they could see the flags. The architects used the information to inform the precise siting of the sculpture and a connection between Crown Point, Burnley and those schoolchildren was made.

It is interesting to speculate that without this and other art-based events, the *Singing Ringing Tree* would not have been seen as so closely connected with the local community, would not have been as successful an emblem of the regeneration of the area, and would not have been given an RIBA award. There is a separation here between the work of the architects and the work of the artists, but it was the synthesis of the two that resulted in a process deemed by the RIBA to be 'architecture'. We suggest that architects should be learning from such examples and integrating 'relational art' techniques to transform their site surveys.

[12] Gayle Knight, Mid-Pennine Arts, personal interview, 25th Sept 2007.

Our remaining examples, which illustrate the potential of the 'creative survey' were done by ourselves or by our students. In each case, the architect places themselves in a position of active engagement with the site and its users and, in so doing, also becomes a user. The following examples use elements of performance to create an active engagement between site, architect and users, and there is a direct connection here between the 'creative surveys' and performance art. The use of performance enables the architect to step outside the role of expert and also invites users of the site to speculate beyond their normative 'roles'. A context is created where the site becomes unknown territory. The architect joins with the existing and potential users of the site and all participants become the surveyors of that unknown place. The survey becomes the context for discovery and experimentation for all who take part. Crucially, this process of discovery uncovers significant and useful insights into the nature of site, the uses to which it will be put, and the needs of users that are impossible to uncover by other means. Furthermore, these processes reinforce the role of the architect. This is not design by committee or by focus group, rather it is a platform for the architect to exercise their professional skills and to fulfill their potential responsibilities. However, the journey to obtaining these insights may require unexpected skills, as our next example from Accrington demonstrates.

*The music of the mariachi could just about be heard over the noise from the buses and the hot dog stand. Claudia stepped up onto the stage that the group had made in front of the old Market Hall. Tentatively, at first she started to step and sway and then, picking up confidence and speed, she twirled her bright orange skirt faster and faster, round and round, her stamps and handclaps becoming louder and more insistent. People reacted in many different ways—some barely seemed to notice, some averted their eyes and hurried past, some stopped and watched, two little girls started their own silly, giggly dance. After a few minutes the music stopped and Claudia stepped down from the stage. People drifted off, back to the shops or into the Market Hall and Accrington town centre returned to normal.*


Fig. 3. Claudia Amico dancing outside the Market Hall, Accrington. Photo: Carolyn Butterworth.

Claudia Amico was interested in the notion of performance in Accrington's town centre and specifically around the market hall and so she decided to dance on a make-shift stage to provoke people's reactions. She had previously interviewed people in the street on the subject but found it difficult to coax out stories and thought dancing might prompt 'a different form of interaction; working on their reaction'.[13] To record these reactions she enrolled her fellow students to talk to people about her dance and the

site. Stories emerged of other dances and performances in Accrington, of how there used to be a lot more dancing and how people don't dance so much in public anymore. The dance also gave Claudia an opportunity to see how people reacted to impromptu performance; how close they stood, how long they watched, 'it was learning by doing',[14] she says.

[13] Claudia Amico, email to Carolyn Butterworth, 25th Sept 2007.

[14] Ibid.

If we scrutinise Claudia's dance we can identify elements of observation, proposal and transformation within it, and it is this synthesis that we believe, characterises it as a 'creative survey'. As an observational tool the performance uncovered current and historical information about the site, the people who use it and what they use it for. As a propositional tool it demonstrated how the market hall area could be used as a performance venue and Claudia feels that it had a marked impact on the development of her design proposal.

> There was a different perspective towards the project after doing this, the idea of human contact [...] the everyday against the unconventional. It was at this point that I felt that all the elements for the concept of the market started coming together.[15]

[15] Ibid.

Finally, Claudia's dance has become rather unexpectedly, a transformative tool to be used as a symbol of a newly reinvigorated town centre by the town council in their masterplan. The dance has been assimilated into the history of the town centre and continues to be generative in its suggestion of possibilities.

*Up close the building is so lickable; sleek chromium, crunchy travertine, squeaky glass, luscious marble. I licked every material I could find including the water of the pond. I like to think the building enjoyed it despite the fact it sent me off with a wretched sore throat.*

*So now I have a special relationship with the Barcelona Pavilion. I remember how it opened up its cracks, splits, smears, scratches and fissures to me and I think of it with fondness. It does a fine job of concealing its decay and flaws and stands impervious as an icon should. But I have licked it, and I know different.*

Fig. 4. Carolyn Butterworth licking the Barcelona Pavilion. Photo: Emma Cheatle.

So much is known about the Barcelona Pavilion, its place within the modernist canon, its construction and reconstruction, and its provenance that it is very difficult to relate to the building on a personal level. When Carolyn was asked to survey the building it was clear to her that carrying out a normative site survey was not going to reveal anything that had

not already been documented comprehensively. She decided to lick the building and was astonished at the richness and usefulness of the survey information that resulted. This implacable, smooth building turned out to be extremely lickable, full of texture and taste. It's clean modernist lines are pitted, moss-ridden and crumbly when licked.

This simple, 'creative survey' revealed the unexpected; Carolyn, as Ben Godber writes, 'has equally articulated the rich textural nature of the materials and the unexpectedly sensual quality of Mies' pavilion'.[16] It also became a very useful generative tool for the development of a design proposal and, in the ongoing use of this image in books and lectures, it has in a sense, transformed the existing building. The Barcelona Pavilion has never been quite the same since.

[16] Ben Godber, 'The Knowing and Subverting Reader' in Jonathan Hill (ed.), *Occupying Architecture*, p. 190.

*In the old shopping arcade a fisherman sits patiently by a gulley, waiting for a bite on the line. The scales of the recently-caught fish next to him gleam in the light from the stained glass windows. Curious shoppers stop and stare, trying to make sense of what had suddenly appeared in a space that they know so well. When they ask him what he is doing the fisherman points out that a river flows under the arcade. Suddenly the ground beneath them is transformed into a thin surface under which is rushing water teeming with fish. Many seem surprised but some offer up stories of how sometimes the river bubbles up through the floor, how it used to be called the 'River Stink' before it was culverted and how they were going to build a theatre on that site until they started digging, found the river and built the arcade instead.*

Fig. 5. Richard Gaete-Holmes fishing in the Victorian Arcade, Accrington. Photo: Kirstin Aitken. Fig. 6. Fish apparently caught in the Victorian Arcade, Accrington. Photo: Richard Gaete-Holmes.

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Kirstin Aitken and Richard Gaete-Holmes were intrigued by the culverted river, which runs underneath Accrington town centre and embarked upon a performance which, as Richard says 'can be seen as an attempt to challenge the public's idea of thresholds and what lies hidden'.[17] As the 'Gutter Fishermen' they spent the day fishing down drains and gullies in a move 'aimed to make a metaphorical and visual link between the hidden realm of the culverted river and the public realm of Accrington town centre'.[18] One such site was the Victorian Arcade, a shabby line of shops where Richard and Kirstin wanted to 'challenge the public's perception of a space that they thought they were familiar with, by suggesting the unknown and engaging their imagination.'[19]

[17] Richard Gaete-Holmes, 'Re: Creative Site Surveys', email to Carolyn Butterworth, 5th Oct 2007.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

The 'Gutter Fishermen' placed themselves in the site and became users for the day and their use of the site was truly unexpected. The playfulness and simplicity of the idea sparked the imagination of other users and a dialogue emerged between architect and user, student and local, fisherman and shopper. Richard and Kirstin's 'creative survey' enabled them to expand the architect's conventional role as observer and engage with the site and users in a way that revealed radical possibilities for the site. As Kirstin says:

> Doing something as absurd as fishing in the arcade made us feel vulnerable but it opened paths of conversation that would never have otherwise been possible, and opened my eyes to aspects of the town that a more conventional survey could not possibly have raised.[20]

[20] Kirstin Aitken, email to Carolyn Butterworth, 5th Oct 2007.

*A cake was built and a stair tower decorated. Refuse chutes were dusted with hundreds and thousands, downpipes were studded with glacé cherries, icing dripped off handrails and the air tasted of sugar. While the kids had fun in a place which had always frightened them, the adults came together and talked. Suddenly an empty stairway became a place of celebration where people met their neighbours, shared news about the estate, discussed its good points, its bad points, its memories and its future.*

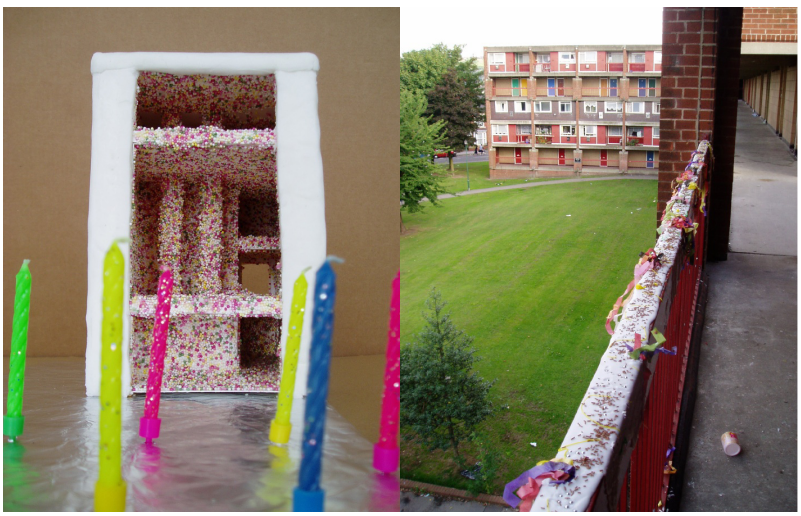

Fig. 7. A cake of the stair tower and iced balustrade, Lansdowne Estate, Sheffield by Carolyn Butterworth, gmproducts & Encounters. Photo: Carolyn Butterworth.

The work of Encounters, artists Trish O'Shea and Ruth Ben-Tovim, has had a great influence on the development of our ideas about 'creative surveys' and how architects can learn from artists. They have occupied three disused shops in Sharrow and transformed them through the collection of stories, artefacts and ideas brought to them by the people who

lived and worked there. By giving attention to the small things in life they open up conversations about the big things and we were inspired by the positive and trusting response they elicited from the people who came to the shops. The knowledge and understanding that Trish and Ruth acquired through this process stands as an impressive 'creative survey' of the area.


Fig. 8. Kids icing the stair tower, Lansdowne Estate, Sheffield by Carolyn Butterworth, gmproducts & Encounters. Photo: Carolyn Butterworth.

We first worked with Encounters in the Lansdowne housing estate, a drab collection of slab blocks built in the early 1970's. We were intrigued by the large stair towers, which overlooked the grounds of the estate, but noticed that rather than stopping and enjoying the space people hurried through as quickly as possible. We knew we wanted to create an event around a stair tower to engage people with the space.

Fig. 9. Iced rubbish chute in the stair tower, Lanssdowne Estate, Sheffield by Carolyn Butterworth, gmproducts & Encounters. Photo: Carolyn Butterworth.

[21] Trish O'Shea, Encounters, personal interview, 4th Oct 2007.

We made a model of a stair tower, then iced and decorated it as a cake with the laundry poles as candles. We then invited the local residents to come to the stair tower, see the cake/model and ice the real thing with us; for an afternoon the site was transformed.

*'Where the well-known Garston Netto stands today, there used to be four small cottages. I used to live in one of those cottages. A small two up-two down with a small back yard. At the back of our property was a railway sidings and a coal stack. One of my fondest memories was when my brother and I removed a loose slat of wood in our back fence. We then sneaked through and had bags of fun sliding down the coal stack, much to our mother's dismay because we always came home black from the coal dust.'*

Fig. 10. The Moey on-site in Liverpool by Encounters and gmproducts. Photo: Sam Vardy.

The Moey project, also in collaboration with Encounters, involved a mobile 'shop' touring South Liverpool for five weeks, not selling but collecting. The Moey followed a route around the neighbourhoods of South Liverpool collecting memories, stories and objects as it went. Visitors to The Moey were asked to leave a bit of themselves behind—an answer to a question, a memory or an image for the next visitor in the next neighbourhood to see and add to. The Moey changed and transformed as things were collected along the route. In itself the Moey became a 'creative survey' and enabled a critical and cultural engagement with parts of South Liverpool that would not have been possible through the one-way processes of observation and recording.

In terms of funding, commissions and agendas the last two projects, in collaboration with Encounters, were art rather than architecture. However, they are entirely relevant to architectural discourse because they are a form of 'creative survey', that is an active, synthesised mechanism which can identify, understand, communicate and transform the site of architectural praxis. By making space for conversation, negotiation and communication, this form of engagement can reveal spatial, economic, social and cultural potentials that are of immediate and practical value to architects, and which are difficult and costly to obtain through other research or survey methods. The 'creative survey' rapidly creates a level of intimacy with the

site itself, which is revealed in multiple dimensions simultaneously, and with the users whose relationship with the site and whose desires for it are demonstrated viscerally.

While the 'creative survey' does not follow a predetermined pattern it usually exhibits the following characteristics:

> It is not limited by a red line around a site
> It is not only carried out by the architect, but by other users too
> It is active, experimental and open-ended
> It makes proposals rather than just recording what is
> It can occur at any time through the design process
> It allows proposals to emerge rather than be imposed
> It employs language and codes that are accessible
> It can 'create processes through which people can together, cope with change.'[21]

In essence, the 'creative survey' expands the focus of the normative site survey to encompass users, time, programme and physical location, and it forges a relationship between all these dimensions. It also attempts to provoke a reaction, thereby encouraging connections to be made between the architect, the client, the users and the site. In so doing it enables opinions to be formed and a feeling of hopefulness to emerge. The provocation of the 'creative survey' elicits a genuine sense of empowerment, for all the users who participate.

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