

Marco Moro  
**The Auckland Drawing School.**  
**On the margins of architectural representation**

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Abstract

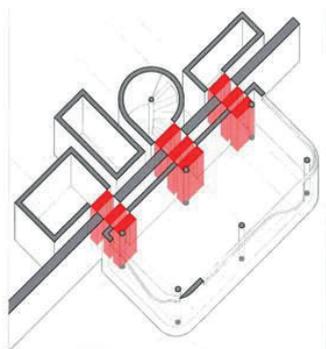
In the early 1980s, the School of Architecture of Auckland already known as “Drawing School” was operating on the far fringes of architectural debate and was experiencing the *theoretical turn* in the context of its teachings. One of the most influential theories on the possibilities of *deconstruction* of architectural discourse travelled with great success between the two hemispheres, shortly after Mark Wigley left the school upon completing his doctoral studies on the subject. What remains unnoticed, however, is the complicity between the affirmation of that theoretical thought and the well-established tradition of the school in the field of representation. Starting from an axonometric composition produced in those years, this contribution aims to examine the tense relationship between drawing as mental and material space, by revealing the unexpected possibilities of insinuating a real counter-argument within the same theoretical apparatus from which that composition seemed to derive.

Keywords

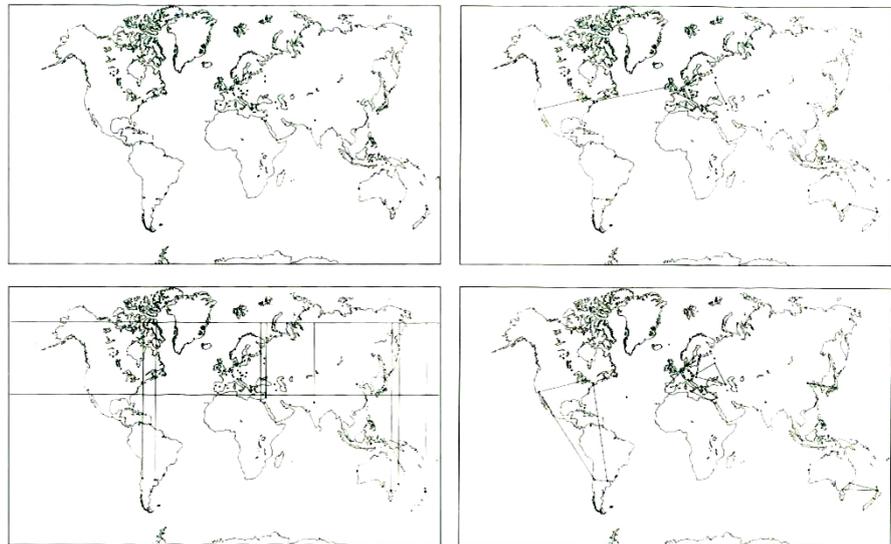
New Zealand Auckland School — axonometric — architectural theory — deconstruction — 1980s

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One of the most recent written works by Peter Eisenman, undisputed champion of analytical drawings as applied to architecture and its theoretical contents, is edited with Elisa Iturbe under the title of *Lateness* (2020). This is a concept that, as the authors argue, goes far beyond the attempts of chronological framing of styles or of the *late* individual production of artists. On the contrary, this concept appears as a unique condition ambiguously suspended in time: «a late work can break historical narratives and cause time to become discontinuous» (2020, p. 19). In the perfect tradition of Eisenman’s investigations, the concept of *lateness* is explored through the medium of axonometric drawings able to further magnify the «analytic frame devoid of function, technology, or social purpose» (2020, p. 4)<sup>1</sup>. The proposed axonometric analyses, in this case applied to the work of three authors united by an alleged *subconscious lateness* – Loos, Rossi and Hejduk – aim to reveal the formal structure behind the theory of fragmentation, with its well-known and canonized version pervading the late-1980s architectural discourse under the impetus of *deconstruction*. (Fig. 1) A decidedly less known aspect concerns the circulation of this theory between the two hemispheres, with Eisenman himself personally involved as external examiner of the doctoral project developed by a young Mark Wigley at the School of Architecture of Auckland, New Zealand: *The Deconstructive Possibilities of Architectural Discourse* (1986), conceived in a remote periphery of cultural interests, would be travelling from one hemisphere to the other very soon becoming one of the most influential architectural theories of contemporary times. Starting from this episode, this paper intends to investigate the agency of architectural representation within a peculiar context, the *theoretical turn* at the School of Architecture of Auckland,



**Fig. 1**  
 Eisenman Architects, analytical drawing (from *Lateness*, Princeton 2020).



**Fig. 2**

Exhibition The Auckland School, Centenary of the University of Auckland School of Architecture and Planning, Gus Fisher Gallery, 8 September – 4 November 2017. Photo by Samuel Hartnett (Courtesy of the University of Auckland School of Architecture).

**Fig. 3**

Mapping of the 43 architecture schools competing for the Venice Prize at the Fifth Architecture Biennale (from «Lotus International» 73, 1992).

already known as “Drawing School” in the South Pacific area.

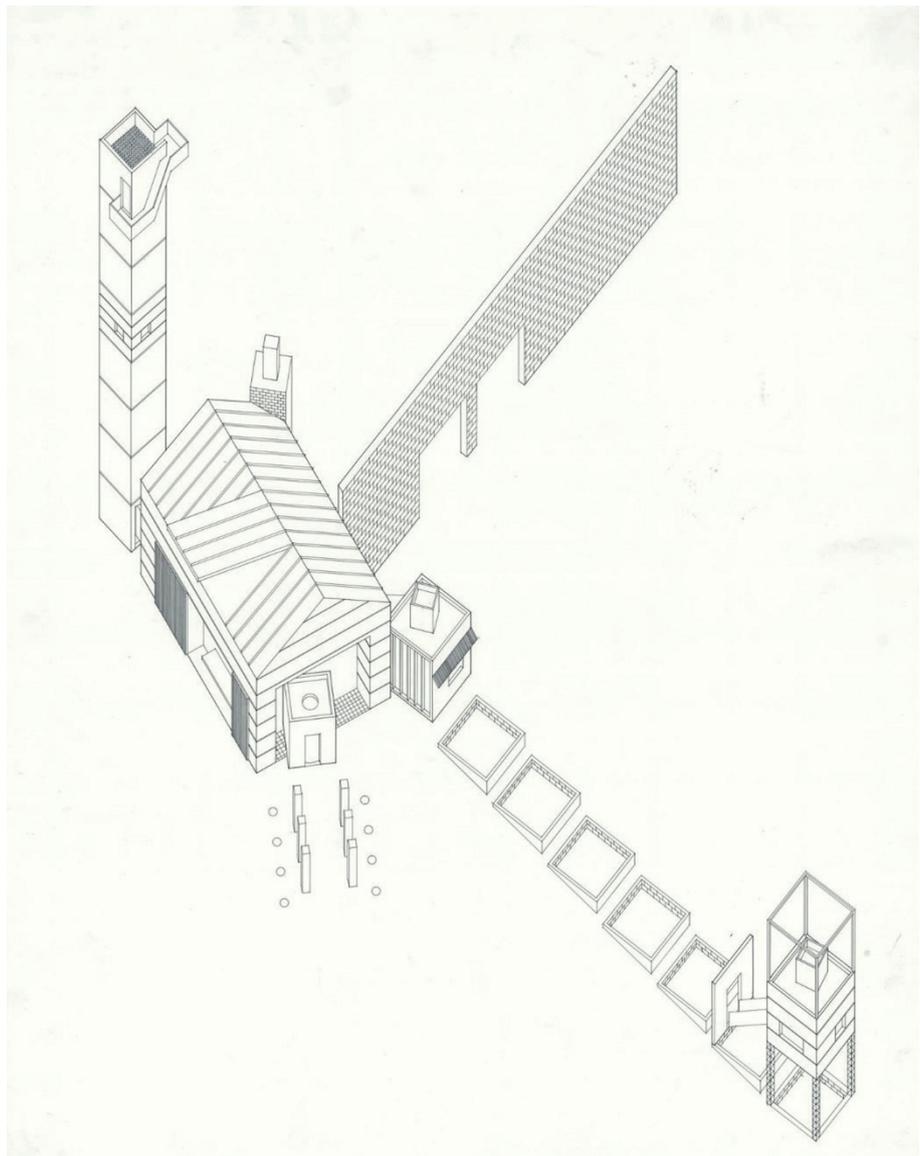
### **The Drawing School. Opportunities and limits**

Celebrated in 2017, the School’s centenary was an opportunity to evoke its epithet earned over time. A warmly received exhibition and related publication (Gatley and Treep 2017) put on stage the extraordinary production of drawings held in the archives and premiered as the School’s distinctive trait progressively refined over the hundred years of teachings in Auckland<sup>2</sup>. (Fig. 2) The Venice Prize at Quinta Biennale di Architettura (1991) stands out among the first international recognitions in this trajectory, awarded to a group of students that unexpectedly excelled with their work on the 43 schools of architecture in competition (Purini 1992). (Fig. 3) At the same time, a certain amount of self-criticism arises from the accounts of Auckland’s former students confessing their immoderate fascination with the effects of representation, that is, complex geometric compositions with delicate shadings, transparencies, and hatches, so meticulously executed that the conceptual-argumentative fundamentals of their projects were obscured<sup>3</sup>.

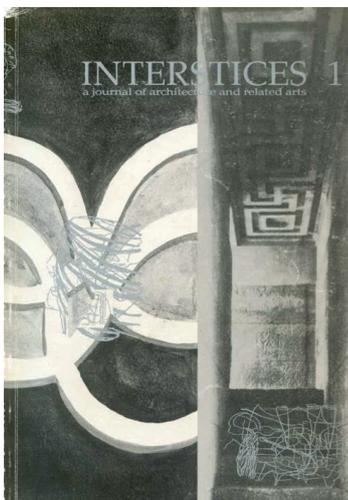
Among the various astonishing examples that confirm this tradition, a bare and discreet axonometric drawing finds a small space. This was produced

**Fig. 4**

Axonometric drawing made by New Zealand architect Craig Moller, as a student of the design studio directed by Mark Wigley in 1985 in Auckland, New Zealand. (Courtesy of Craig Moller).



as a result of a design studio taught by Mark Wigley in 1985, that is, during the final stages of his doctoral studies. The author of the drawing is Craig Moller – currently director of Moller Architects that designed Auckland’s iconic Sky Tower in the early 1990s – at the time involved in the School’s complex transition from the obsessive production of «Caran d’Ache pastel drawings to hard-line analytical drawings»<sup>4</sup>. (Fig. 4) Indeed, this bare and discreet axonometric was part of a larger movement since a School’s internal current began working to affirm the relevance of theoretical thought underlying architectural projects, supported but not dominated by those forms of representation that made a thought conveyable. It is important to note that Mark Wigley belonged to the first generation of students from the School moved by such an ambition, handed down to them by a small group of young teachers. His thesis supervisor Mike Austin was in the group along with other well-recognized figures – such as Ross Jenner and David Mitchell – though they weren’t alone<sup>5</sup>. (Fig. 5) Sarah Treadwell, the first woman to be permanently integrated into the school staff, offered a crucial contribution towards a full-fledged *theoretical turn*. With her essay-manifesto *Architecture Drawing: A statement of Position* (1986), Treadwell claimed the potential of drawing in informing the most critical, speculative and argumentative dimension of architectural thought<sup>6</sup>. However, it is



**Fig. 5**  
The Architecture of Deconstruction (1993) and cover of the first issue of the New Zealand journal «Interstice» (1990).

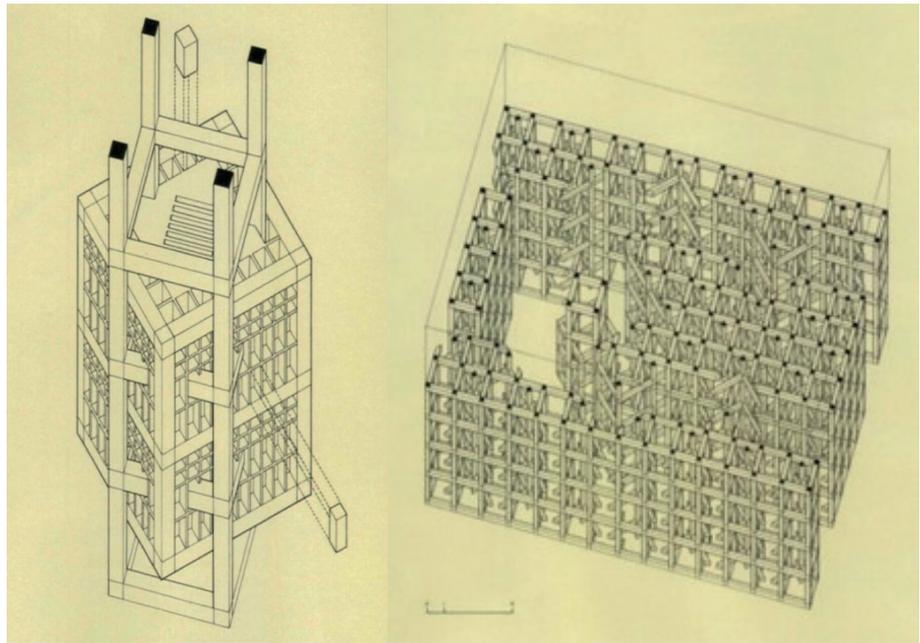
through a close analysis of Moller's axonometric – apparently marginal if compared with the restless period – that one can interrogate the complicit relationship between the solid affirmation of a theoretical thought and drawing as a penetrating tool to convey that same thought. This bare and discreet axonometric, hence, is not simply reconsidered to document the complicity playing in favour of *deconstruction* as one of the most influential theories of contemporary architectural discourse. In fact, scrutinized in its materiality, the drawing reveals unexpected possibilities of insinuating a counter-argument within the same theoretical apparatus from which it seems to derive.

### The brief. On the pedagogy of analytical drawing

Moller's drawing is the result of a short-term design studio, at the second professional year in Auckland. It lasted about three weeks, at the end of which there was a dedicated time for the preparation of the drawings to be submitted for the final crits. The studio *brief* did not seem to be particularly informed by theoretical issues on *deconstruction* that Mark Wigley was deeply investigating. As Moller himself recalls, «there were no seminars on Derrida's philosophical thought to inspire our design proposals»<sup>7</sup>. It does confirm the main argument behind Wigley's work, that is to problematize the relationship between architecture, representation, and deconstruction by resisting the superficial appropriation of concepts from other disciplines (*bad borrowings*) and the simplified translations from theory to practice (*bad translations*). In an attempt to reverse this relationship by stimulating the contribution of architecture to the powerful deconstructionist theoretical framework, students were required to put into action a collision between two architectures arbitrarily chosen by each of them, that is to say, by resorting to one's own reference field inherent with the discipline as derived from one's own innermost memories. The explication of the collision process in the final composition was entrusted to a specific representation technique: «each drawing had to be axonometric [...] We weren't allowed to draw in plan, or in section, let alone the perspectival sketches which were fairly dominant in the school at the time». The final draft was thus converted into a proper analytical device which aimed not simply at overcoming the experiential and perceptive approach rooted in the school. But it did so by purging the studio brief of all the information that would assimilate this experiment to a situated object in terms of *construction, function, and place*.

### In the context of lateness. Reference field between Rossi, Judd and Gehry

Apparently, Moller's axonometric composition obeys all the studio brief instructions. It should also be considered that the previously described analytical approach acquires a specific and deeper meaning in the context of New Zealand's marginalization. The construction of a disciplinary field of references suffered the vast distance from the official distribution centers of architecture debate and the consequent impossibility of finding updated information<sup>8</sup>. However, it is precisely this delay in the flow of information – a suspension in time or *lateness* – that the most original recombinations can benefit from, such as the one represented in the axonometric drawing in question. In concrete terms, the potential of analytical approaches seem the more appropriate in order to evade the passage of time in a context of isolation such as that of New Zealand, rather than making choices based



**Fig. 6**  
Stanley Tigerman, axonometric drawings for the Formica company, 1986.

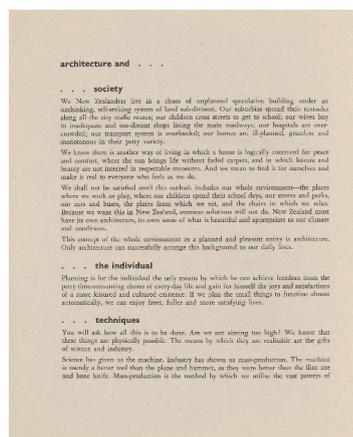
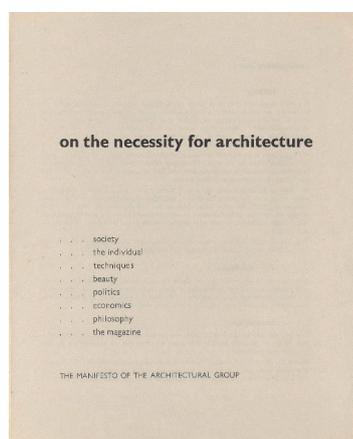
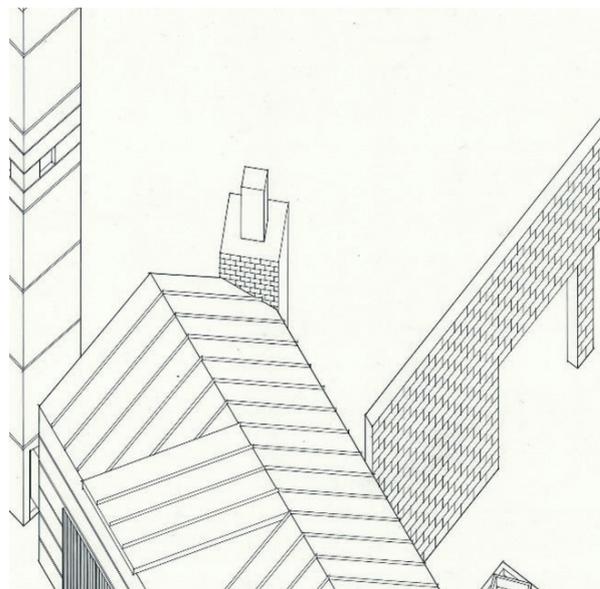
on the updatedness of a given architectural language. (Fig. 6) It should be emphasized that, by admission of its own author, the compositional process elaborated by Moller was to some extent influenced by Aldo Rossi's thoughts: «I was certainly aware that the hay barn at the center of the composition was the *archetype* of New Zealand [...] and besides Rossi's typological intuitions I was incredibly fascinated by those late concepts exposed in his *Scientific Autobiography*»<sup>9</sup>. Indeed, analysing the content of the axonometric composition we can easily recognize the typical hay barn surrounded by other fragments: some of them are memories recovered by the author – the imposing block wall – while others derive from his disciplinary field of reference. For instance, the ordered sequence of cubic elements was inspired by Donald Judd's sculptures which started to circulate in the early-1980s art magazines, while the watchtower-like structure that creeps into the lower corner of the composition is extrapolated from the Norton House in Venice, California (1983-84) designed by Frank Gehry. The sphere of influence of the whole composition appears so complete, as for Wigley's intent of «exporting the qualities of architecture» (2002, p. 92) using drawing as a textual and argumentative practice in the field of deconstruction. In addition to this, the Rossi-inspired paratactic configuration of 'pieces' and 'parts' – in the terms expressed by Ezio Bonfanti (1970) – might suggest the repositioning of this drawing scattered across the extreme periphery of architectural debate as an excellent example of the time. What goes unnoticed, however, is the tense relationship between drawing as a mental space for formulating architectural thoughts and its material consistency resulting from the method of representation which has been adopted as an agent to impact the design process itself. In other words, this tension makes the agency of drawing explicitly operational by insinuating a counter-argument into the initial *brief* and calling into question all those aspects that were intentionally left out.

### **Between lines. Construction, function, and place**

While the rapidographer's geometric and sharp trait enhances the required analytical approach, the varied treatment scrupulously applied to the drawing's textures betrays the author's intention to convey a piece of information on the constructive aspects of the architectural fragments that participate in

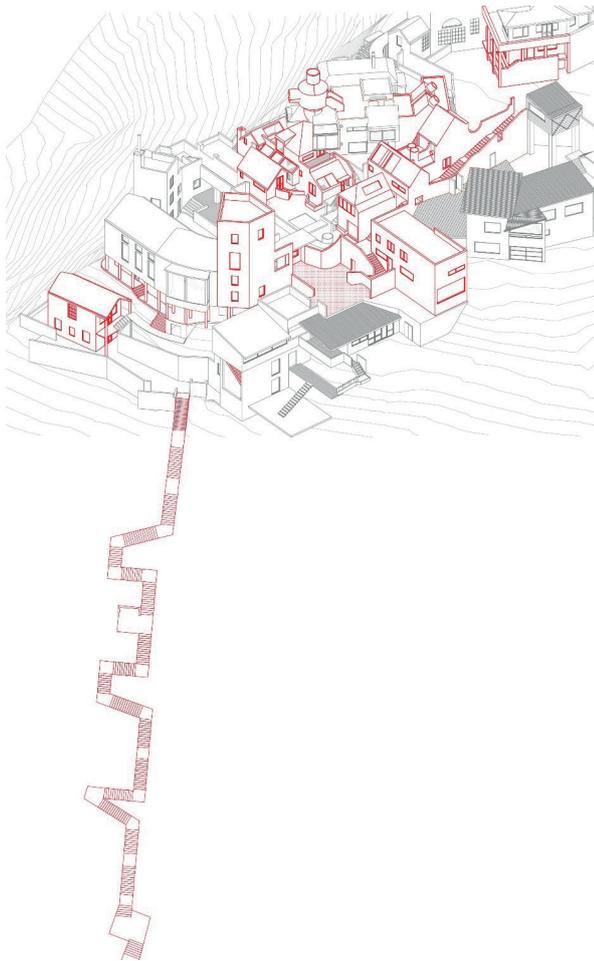
**Fig. 7**

Enlargement of Craig Moller's drawing which highlights the material qualities and the domestic character of the fragments represented.

**Fig. 8**

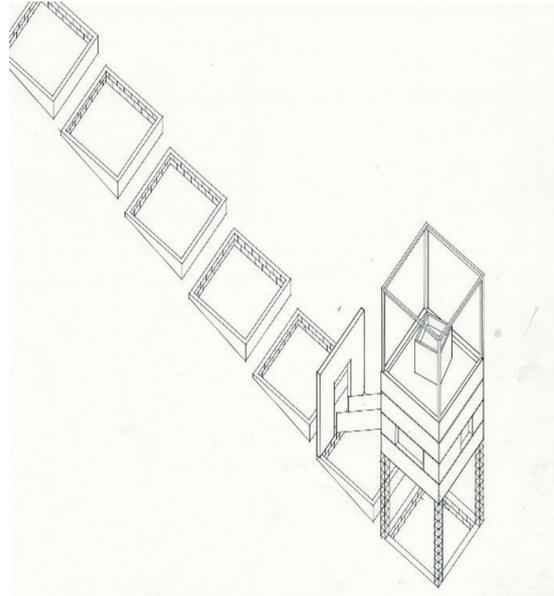
Manifesto of the Group Architects, "On the necessity for architecture", 1949 (Courtesy of Special Collections, Libraries and Learning Services, University of Auckland).

the axonometric composition. The size of the blocks is easily measured in the slanting wall and in the cubic elements inspired by Judd's sculptures, as well as for the cross-hatching as applied to the cladding: «I was obviously aware of how to describe the New Zealand hay barn, and how to put all the constituents of its materiality on paper: light timber frame, metal cladding, wide openings and sliding doors often mounted on the outside [...] I'm pretty sure that all this knowledge about construction wasn't part of the studio. But it was definitely part of the *two architectures* I chose for the drawing, and of all the other fragments that compose it». This revelation sounds quite interesting when compared with a certain obsession with those constructive aspects typical of Kiwi architectural culture, which for Wigley had represented the greatest obstacle to the development of radical architectural thinking in the country (Wigley 1986; Barrie 2013). In this sense, *function* was also seen as a limiting attribute to the point of being neglected in the studio brief. The detail of the brick chimney scratching a corner of the hay barn, however, insinuates a sense of domesticity in the use of the space with the archetype of the barn suggesting alternative ways of living (Fig.7). Moller recalls that, although no function was initially established, «the final result is an inhabited space made up of three autonomous elements that define three different areas/functions»<sup>10</sup>. It must be said that, however generic, the act of declaring a residential function offered a contingent response to the New Zealand context, in the constant search for alternatives to the settlement model of detached-houses. This lively and rich debate dates back to the Group Architects' manifesto (1949)<sup>11</sup>, (Fig.8) later reinterpreted and radically applied by New Zealand architect Ian Athfield on the Wellington hills. Although it was not explicitly included in the reference field of Moller's axonometric composition, the Athfield House-and-Office (1965) stimulated collective forms of living and working in a built complex made of *pieces* and *parts* as a result of an incremental process – still in progress – which explored the housing topic on a large-scale in a completely unprecedented way<sup>12</sup>. (Fig. 9) The large-scale is that of the *landscape*, the third element inextricably connected with New Zealand architectural culture and subtly insinuated into Moller's axonometric composition through a nearly imperceptible detail. The analytical approach enhanced by a rigorous line drawing did not prevent the author from signaling the inclination of the lines that define the orderly disposed sequence



**Fig. 9**  
Athfield House-and-Office (re-design by the author).

**Fig. 10**  
Enlargement of Craig Moller's drawing showing the natural slope of the ground.



of cubic elements. This simple gesture provide us with more information on the slope of the ground above which the composition is arranged, and its specific location (Fig. 10): «I well remember that those kind of architectural investigations weren't *site-specific*. However, when I did my final submission that included this drawing, I did select a site». The composition suddenly becomes a situated object in the Chatham Islands, that is the easternmost point of New Zealand. Apart from the mostly uncontaminated hilly landscape that inspired the author's choice, the geographical position is that of a place suspended in space, but especially in time, since a gap of 45 minutes on Auckland makes the Chatham Islands the first inhabited land to inaugurate a new day every day: «The Islands are, if you like, between New Zealand and the rest of the world. That was also the same principle according to which I positioned my proposal for Mark's studio, namely between the New Zealand hay barn and the Judd's sculptures, or the other fragments from my memory. I believe the same was true for the architectural theory discourse that informed this drawing, I mean, not necessarily a theory of New Zealand architecture, but a theory about architecture which embraced New Zealand for the first time».

In conclusion, leaving in the background the long conflict between adherence and resistance towards different representation techniques, this apparently peripheral episode brings to the center the crucial role of drawing in the formulation of architectural thought. Not only as an instrument to legitimize a theory as such, but as a privileged territory of contestation as happened in the case of one of the most influential theories that have travelled between the two hemispheres.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Eisenman is certainly not the only exponent in the use of axonometric drawing, but he is certainly among those who have enhanced its analytical function in complicity with theoretical thought. This analytical approach, Eisenman recalls, dates back to the time of his doctoral research *The Formal Basis of Modern Architecture* (1963), deeply conditioned by Colin Rowe's teachings in representing what is *missing* in architecture rather than what is already clearly visible.

<sup>2</sup> The publication edited by Julia Gatley and Lucy Treep (2017) contains a dedicated section entitled *100 Years of Drawings*.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Barrie, currently professor at the School of Architecture and Planning of Auckland, reports in detail on the students' approach at the time: «They would hunch obsessively over a few sheets of mylar or expansive watercolour for weeks, clutch pencils and fanatically 6H leads in hand. This could go to extremes [...] students would skip straight from conceptual thinking to presentation drawings to allow more time to draw» (Barrie 2017, p. 108).

<sup>4</sup> Craig Moller, interviewed by the author on 13/11/2020. In general, this contribution is structured on the basis of the author's on-site studies, that is, visits, archival research, and conversations with the protagonists of the local debate.

<sup>5</sup> Ross Jenner obtained his PhD on Italian Modernism at the University of Pennsylvania under the supervision of Joseph Rykwert, then he founded the New Zealand magazine «Interstice» to promote the theoretical discourse on architecture. In the same years, David Mitchell was co-author of *The Elegant Shed: New Zealand Architecture since 1945* (and of the homonymous television series).

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Treadwell, who currently continues to work as a New Zealand-based artist, obtained her first teaching appointment in the field of drawing and representation in 1981, as a result of the heated protest of the activist group *Woman in Architecture* formed in 1979.

<sup>7</sup> This is also confirmed by Wigley himself: «In my own teachings, I have never asked students to read a single text by Derrida, despite having devoted a decade of my life thinking about his work» (2002, p. 93).

<sup>8</sup> In a recent conversation with Julia Gatley (*Fast Forward lecture series* - Spring 2021), Wigley traces his first intuitions on deconstruction in the architectural field to the brief encounter with Stanley Tigerman who occasionally visited New Zealand at the invitation of the Formica company (1984). In fact, his visit was highly anticipated since Tigerman was among those who were literally manipulating the late modernist architectural discourse (the *Titanic* collage depicting the sinking of Mies' iconic architectures was already famous), but the inability of the school to hold the guest for a reasonable period of time sparked a student revolt against the limitations of isolation. That same year, isolation was mitigated through the foundation of SAHANZ (Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand).

<sup>9</sup> Moller deepened these studies in his two years of Masters at Yale, where the English translation of Rossi's *Scientific Autobiography* published by «Oppositions» was circulating since 1981.

<sup>10</sup> Reference is made to the barn as a living area, the raised structure of the watchtower as a studio space and the bathroom located on the ground floor of the back tower.

<sup>11</sup> From the Group Architects' manifesto, the first expression of New Zealand modernism, we can read: «New Zealand must have its own architecture, its own sense of what is beautiful and appropriate to our climate and conditions [...] We New Zealanders live in a chaos of unplanned speculative building under an unthinking, self-seeking system of land sub-division». On this subject see Gatley (2010).

<sup>12</sup> The Athfield House-and-Office came to house 40 residents and 25 workers.

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