



Left  
Sketch fiction of  
imagined den enclosure  
© Paul Stallan

“Nowhere was off-limits ... on a roof, within a derelict building, in a tree, in the bins, under a bridge or beneath a pylon.”

# Personal typology:

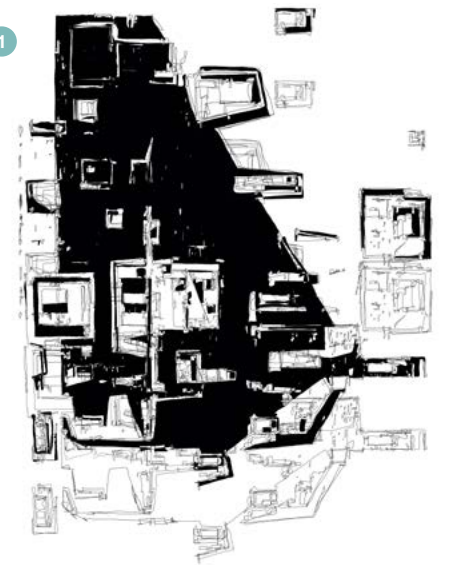
## Examining the DNA of private architecture seems prescient during a pandemic

For over twenty years I have been drawing the same imaginary space. The space fixation I have is with the ‘den’. I have obsessively drawn a million permutations of this primal ‘residential’ space type. I am able to lose myself in the mindful gymnastics of resolving a ‘den-design’ in under five minutes and capture it in a sketch. My small drawings have at points been super scaled up onto large canvas and intermittently expressed as scale models. Occasionally I have built one. **1 2**

My spatial rumination started as a child. I was a prolific den builder and recall each construction and its location to this day. I have memories of always being outdoors. Even though the family lived in urban locations, my cousin and I could always smoke out an unsupervised space, I say smoke, as lighting fires with stolen matches was part of ritual. Nowhere was off-limits ... on a roof, within a derelict building, in a tree, in the bins, under a bridge or beneath a pylon.

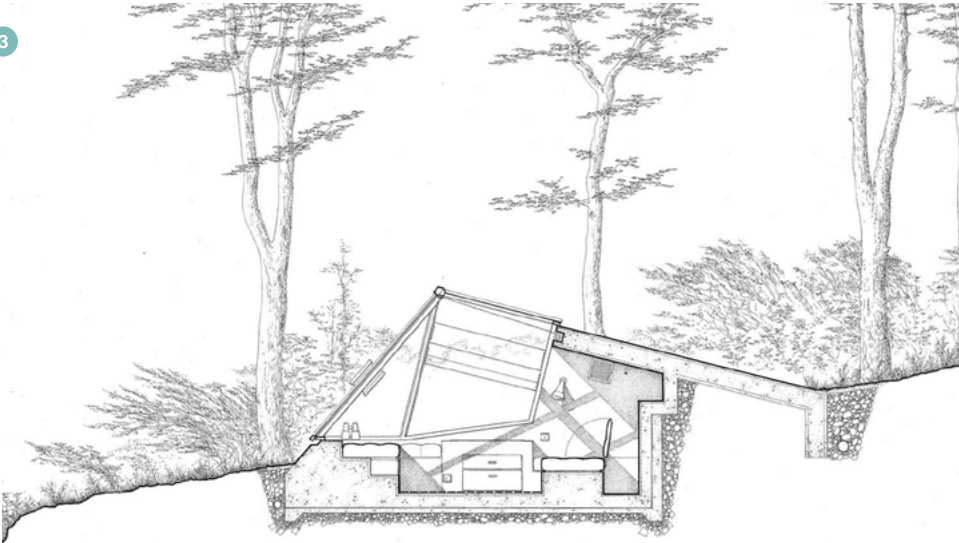
As I got older I remember being attracted to books like *Stig of the Dump*, *Swiss Family Robinson*, *Robinson Crusoe*, any narrative that involved some form of self build construction and ingenuity. I clearly remember drawing alternate versions of Stig’s junk house. Little did I know that these imaginings would ultimately drive my interest in studying architecture. Fast forward and my den building has simply matured and my appetite for unique self-determined space remains.





A first project at architecture school is the design of a shelter, a small enclosure that celebrates space, structure and form. It is a universal project that introduces students to the fundamental challenges they will ultimately wrestle with as practicing architects forever more. Looking back at some of the precedent projects we referenced reveals new insight.

Norman Foster's design in 1966 for a small 'Retreat', is a project that evidences many of the preoccupations that were to consume his fifty plus years of practice; aspect, orientation, technology, efficiency of means, design



ergonomics, the natural world, geometry, clarity of concept and more ... it's a den. 3 4

As a student I remember seeing an early manifesto project by architect Toyo Ito and his then intern Kazuyo Sejima, in Glasgow's Tramway gallery called 'House for a Nomadic Woman'. The 'house' was suspended effortlessly in the upper volume of the gallery, a ghost space existential in its technological minimalism. With wire, fabric and glass it appeared like a cloud surely unable to support the weight of a person. Again, an early project by two seminal architects that captured many of the ideas they both went onto explore,

de-materialisation, structural ambiguity, transparency, fragility. 5

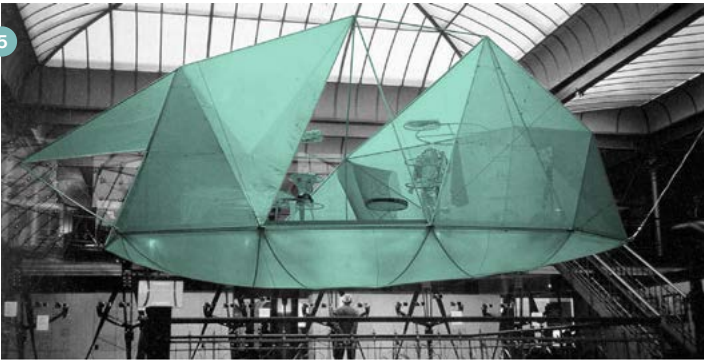
It is clear the DNA of an architectural language can be explored in 'small architecture' designed to address you and your relationship with world, like an extra skin. Certainly my minor sketchbook exercises permeate and sustain my own thinking, providing me with 'conceptual nutrients'. Drawing as fiction is relevant to my own 'means of making' architecture and I believe especially fertile for exploring residential design.

When drawing a 'den' I imagine an exposed idealised site somewhere in Scotland.

- 1 Sketch of imaginary 'submarinesque' den design with its complex interior revealed through cutout and pop-out windows.
- 2 Detail of exploratory 'Den' model with imagined interior.
- 3 Architect Norman Foster, 'The Retreat' – Long Section
- 4 Photograph of 'The Retreat'
- 5 Images of Architect Toyo Ito and Kazuyo Sejima House for a Nomadic Woman
- 6 Sketch collage and 'architecture play' adding a shipshape 'skin' to the historic tower house.

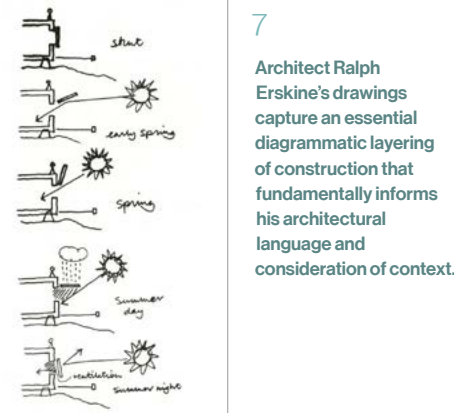
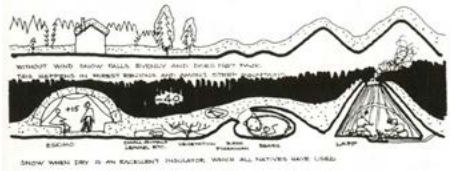
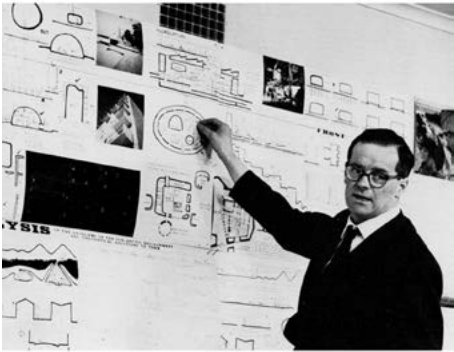
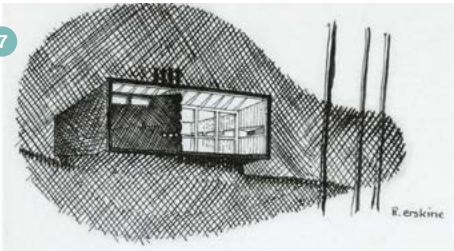
I have a name in my head for these den 'types' I draw ... 'weatherforms', these forms eschew sunny climates and are designed to address low cloud, horizontal rain, snow, rising damp, darkness and to take advantage of limited sunshine ... sound familiar? My brief is then to structurally, spatially and formally orchestrate a small architecture 'play'. 6

Considering other architects 'means of making' has helped my own conceptualising. I have come to increasingly appreciate the work of legacy architect Ralph Erskine for his sophistication and ability to evolve a human architecture borne from his interest in 'climatic



architecture' especially relevant today. His architecture in the UK and Sweden with forays into the Arctic, provide critical lessons on how we can better address our climate emergency ... it is worth revisiting.

My 'weatherform' den concepts touch on many of the ideas Erskine explored in his drawings, namely an interest in hierarchal construction. Each of Erskine's designs has a perfect common diagram that combines a structural, spatial and formal response. This diagrammatic layering of construction is especially critical for an architecture that requires to address extreme weather.

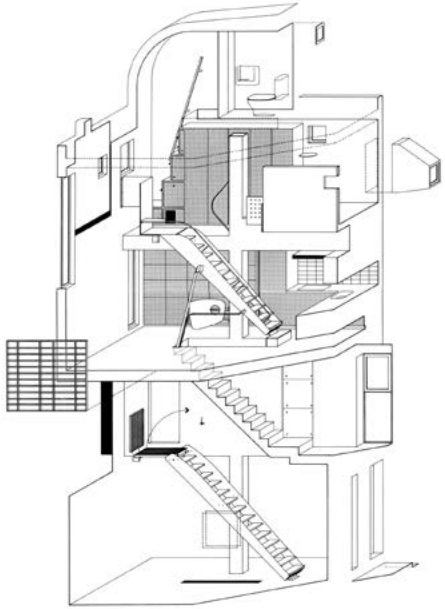


From the intimacy of his office, which was a boat (a floating den), his residential architecture appears to grow from 'cocooned' fireplaces and kitchens. These intimate spaces then find themselves within clearly expressed 'isolated' structure that supports super-insulated walls and 'hermetic skins'. On top of this layering of technology there is a further accoutrement of 'add-ons' that never disrupt the 'cold bridge', like balconies, bay windows and porches. 7

Erskine's compositional 'layer-cakes' are then morphed to create spatial hierarchy by means of courtyards, gardens, streets and



8



8

Architect Bolles Wilson creates ‘fictions’ to support their figurative architecture and expression. Opposite their ‘Suzuki House in Tokyo’.

Photograph Ryuji Miyamoto

“A House as a large family room suspended in the city.

A house with a child’s room suspended within.

A house with two legs and a usable roof.

A house glanced by a passing Ninja.”



squares, always cognisant of orientation, prevailing wind, views and topography ... genius. Erskine’s intelligent design creates architecture with unique character and an idiosyncratic vernacular all of its own. Compared to the ‘debased super slab with pinhole window architecture’ of recently conceived ‘Passivhaus’ building ... Erskine’s work is standout.

Another architect whose ‘drawing fictions’ I have enjoyed and whose contextually responsive work takes ‘architectural figuration’ and makes it an art form, is the work of Bolles-Wilson. The ‘diagramming’ that supports their design process never stops and spans between the macro and micro concept to create an

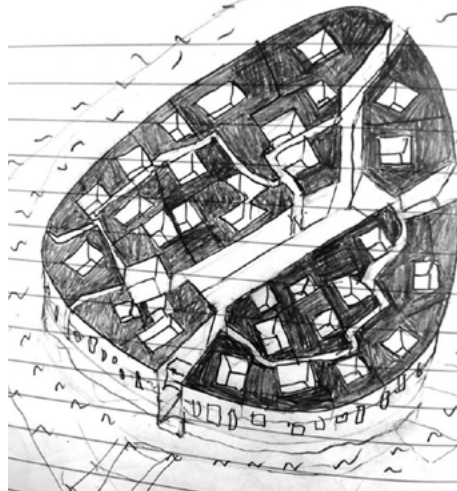
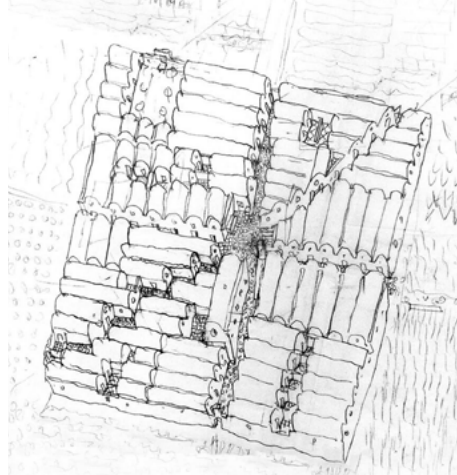
array of complex coded elements that combine to make a complete graphic architecture. The role that drawing and capturing ‘narrative fragments’ is crucial to their work. Their Suzuki House in Tokyo is a long term favourite ‘den’, which manifests a mini universe of ideas that they have gone on to expand in their larger projects. <sup>8</sup>

The parallels between these reference projects and my own study in drawing or collage is in the importance of narrative and the subjugation of structure. Give me ‘cranes, frames, bridges, grids of any kind, a matrix of interconnecting components’ and I am lost in the possibilities. I can start a sketch with a skeletal form and then find myself having

to resolve an architecture for it. It’s like the squiggle game I played with my children, where you make a random series of marks on paper and ask the other person to make it into something, it’s the architectural equivalent ... try it.

When I look at the work of the ingenious London architect Peter Barber, I see a very direct relationship between his exploratory sketching and his built work. He set himself a project to design a hundred cities in a hundred days, absurd (like my own pretensions), but useful to him and his cognition when approaching more typical briefs. It is clear how the investment he has made in his own critical thinking through drawing infuses his work. <sup>9</sup>

9



9

Architect Peter Barber, ‘Sketch Designs for a Hundred Cities in a Hundred Days’

The pièce de résistance in residential design is the window, if our homes are small theatres that frame our daily rituals and prioritise our interests, then we need a lens to look back at the world, a scenic window. Think of the contribution window design made to the work of Charles Rennie Mackintosh, where a ‘window’ might be on top of a wall, within a wall or popping out of one to create an eyrie, a doocot or sitootery: all den typologies.

A recent culmination of my den rumination is the completion of a small house that I designed in the Kyles of Bute. It’s small submarine that peeks out from the hillside to say ‘go away’, a private stealth architecture that is almost impossible to get to as it is to find.

10



It started in true den style as a found space, a rotting husk on the gable end of a small tenement. We scooped it out and reversed its original construction diagram, wrapping the stonework in a full metal jacket. <sup>10</sup>

Internally a three-storey volume wiggles around a kitchen and fire to reach a long metal slot at the top. This is where I am installing my ordnance ‘Guns of Navarone’ style so I can take out a few yachties as they waft through the straits. A perfect zombie apocalypse house, when the city pad is compromised. The reality ... a tiny wee place we saved hard for that allows us to escape and hide.

My intention in this short text was to celebrate residential imaginings through



10

My ‘Guns of Navarone’ style ‘den’ in the Kyles of Bute pops up on the hillside dressed in ‘full metal jacket’. Designed in conjunction with Jamie Ross now Technique Architecture.

Photographs © Paul Stallan

drawing. To enjoy the nuance inherent in a simple sketch that might belie an underlying agenda and personal signature. There is a TV clip of Picasso being interviewed on a talk show where the host asks him to draw a bird on a sheet of paper right there and then. Picasso obliges and the host says “that sketch took you one minute to make, I could sell this for a fortune at auction ... Picasso follows by saying, “No, that is where you are wrong – that sketch took me a lifetime”.

Explore the value of drawing fictions in lock-down and rediscover art and architecture. ■  
**Paul Stallan FRIAS RIBA**  
Stallan-Brand