

The Spiritual in Models of Thought and Models of Architecture: A Design-based Approach to Researching the Spiritual

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This contribution refers to the author's design-based research, which uses the architectural model as a tool through which to research the spiritual.

In the Italian Renaissance architects elevated the status of their profession by distancing themselves from the craft-based practices of the medieval master mason. Since then architects have tended to emphasize the intellectual, rather than the manual basis of their labor. This division between manual and intellectual labor, and the privileging of the latter, has influenced architects' conceptions of matter and architects' attitudes towards different modes of architectural production, such as drawing, model-making, writing and building.

Since architectural drawings have traditionally been less material than architectural models, that is, they have literally been made of less matter and involved less manual labor in their production, architectural drawings have been more readily associated with the intellectual: matter and intellect being necessarily distinct and incompatible within such traditions. A consequence of this has been that designing, theorizing and researching have tended to occur at a remove from processes of making and/or building and therefore architectural models, which before the invention of CAD, involved considerable manual labor in their production, have been accorded a rather indeterminate role and status.

Architectural models have been widely used in post-medieval design processes; however, they have not played as significant a role as architectural drawings or texts in the theorization or conceptualization of architecture. Whilst architectural theorists commonly theorize architecture by drawing and/or writing, they rarely do so through model-making or building. The architectural models referred to in this contribution question the assumed fragmentation between manual and intellectual labor: instead, these models advocate the integration of the manual and/or the material with the intellectual, but in addition to this, they also aspire to integrate the spiritual.

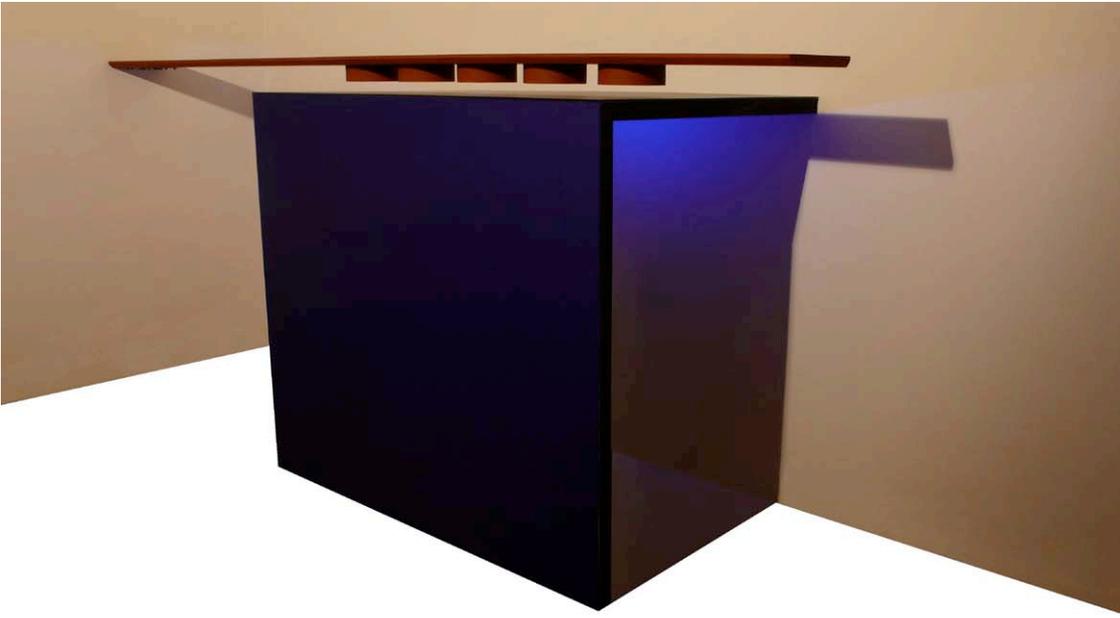
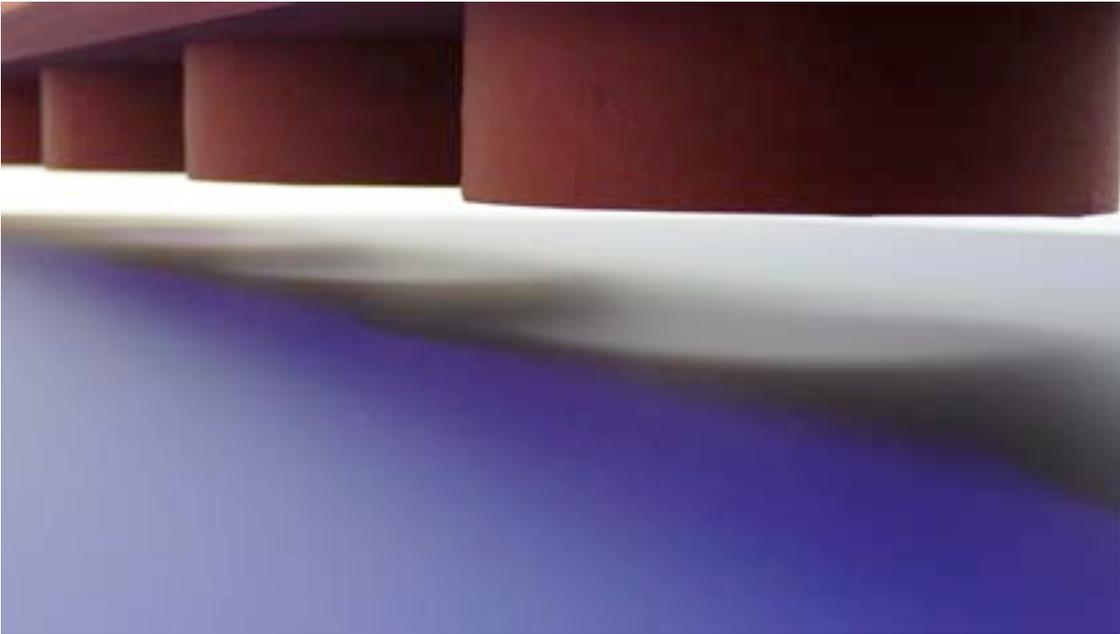
The spiritual is often considered to be a contentious subject within academic contexts. First, the spiritual tends to be conflated with the religious and following this, it is thought to be outside or beyond the scope of investigative academic research. In some pre-Newtonian models of thought spirits were believed to exist as an integral component of matter. However, in the seventeenth century, these models of thought underwent a radical transformation. Through the work of early scientific thinkers such as William Harvey, Jan Baptist van Helmont, René Descartes and Isaac Newton, the spiritual component of matter was first questioned, before then being rejected

altogether. The spirits that existed in pre-Newtonian theories of matter could not be verified through the emerging model of science because they could not be identified through empirical observation. As a consequence of this, but also as a consequence of the related introduction of a Deist conception of God, contemporaneous models of thought were increasingly secularized. By the end of the eighteenth century matter was assumed to be essentially passive, inert, soulless and static: containing no spirit at all.

Contemporary skepticism towards the spiritual is often founded upon, and supported by, a materialist metaphysics. Materialist metaphysics can be defined as the idea that the world is fully explainable through its material properties. In his book *Post-Secular Philosophy* (1998) the theologian Philip Blond challenges this assumption by articulating an argument for the perceptual rediscernment of the spiritual. Blond integrates aspects of twentieth century phenomenology to articulate a position that is both contemporary and spiritual, or what he calls 'post-secular'. Blond argues that an invisible dimension exists within the heart of matter and he maintains that this invisibility prohibits matter from being ultimately reducible to, and exhaustively explainable through, a materialist metaphysics. Instead, he locates the origins of matter, and of the material world, in the spiritual: 'things themselves', he writes, 'are utterly donated givens, gifts whose phenomenology is saturated with their origin in God' (Blond, 1998, 7).

It is the contention of this contribution that architects tend to accept and reproduce secular conceptions of matter. In addition to the assumed incompatibility between manual and intellectual labor, architects tend to automatically assume that the material is not connected in any way to the spiritual. In contrast, the architectural models referred to in this contribution, speculatively explore how the manual and/or the material might be integrated with the intellectual *and* the spiritual through design-based research. To date, two architectural models have been designed and built. These models are made of familiar modeling materials such as acrylic, plywood, paint and resin but they also incorporate magnets. The magnetic fields generated by the magnets enable various parts of the models to be held in a kind of levitative tension where distinct planes are suspended without observable means of structural support.

The perception of the models can be associated with the perceptual rediscernment of the spiritual articulated by Blond, since both involve the perception of the invisible within the heart of the material. Although here it must be noted that the apprehension of the invisibility to which Blond refers, as he acknowledges, requires a disengagement from secular and materialist approaches towards cognition and perception itself; consequently Blond is not referring to phenomena that are literally invisible such as magnetic fields and therefore the role played by the invisible magnetic fields in the architectural model with regard to the spiritual, is metaphorical rather than literal.



Design Investigation No. 2, 2008.

Perspex, MDF, Magnets, Red Oxide Primer: 230 x 60 x 85cm

Photographic detail (above)

Photograph (below)

In questioning the tradition of divided labour this design-based research proposes a new type of model for architectural design; not only a new type of architectural model in the sense of the architectural model as a material artefact, but also as a model of thought. The model that is proposed is one that includes the manual and/or the material, the intellectual and the spiritual. The idea that architects are practitioners of intellectual labour has been accepted since the Italian Renaissance. The idea that architects might also design, theorize and research through processes that involve and value manual labour is sometimes recognized but this is not typical. However, the idea that architects might also practise and value spiritual labour is rather more unfamiliar territory.

Like the models of Vitruvius in antiquity, and of the models of Alberti and Filarete in the Renaissance, which provided architects with a model for how they might think and write about their work, this design-based research proposes a new type of model. In conclusion it is hoped that this model might encourage architects to think, design, write, make and build, in ways that recognize, cultivate, employ and enjoy, the material, the intellectual *and* the spiritual.