## LUCY+ JORGE ORTA: POTENTIAL ARCHITECTURE

Cells are a part of the human body; they are at the origin of its being, its feelings, its emotions, and its sufferings. Thus, they speak the language of the body. There are also cells of habitation. The relationship between people and their habitat is formed in this metaphorical cell. Living and being become a single and unique life experience. CRISTINA MOROZZI

*Potential Architecture* explores artists Lucy+Jorge Orta's recent architectural endeavors that derive from their fascination with cell biology and the process of differentiation. Through drawings and sculpture, the artists conceptualize the communication process the human cell undertakes from its embryonic state, and the infinite transformations that lead to defined structural organisms.
This new body of work draws from Lucy+Jorge Orta's artistic practice, grounded in the universal concerns of community, shelter, migration, and sustainable development.

*Potential Architecture* is a powerful rejoinder to the arbitrary boundaries that define art, architecture, and design.

ISBN 978-88-6208-290-7
$ 40.00 | £ 25.00

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Design Ellen Gögler / npeg.fr
Printed June 2013 – Grafiche Damiani, Bologna, Italy

With the support of Arts Council England South East
In collaboration with Centre for Sustainable Fashion, University of the Arts London; University of Southampton; Arts University Bournemouth

Published to coincide with the exhibition Lucy + Jorge Orta: Potential Architecture at TheGallery, Arts University Bournemouth, 7 September – 7 November 2013

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ISBN : 9788862082907

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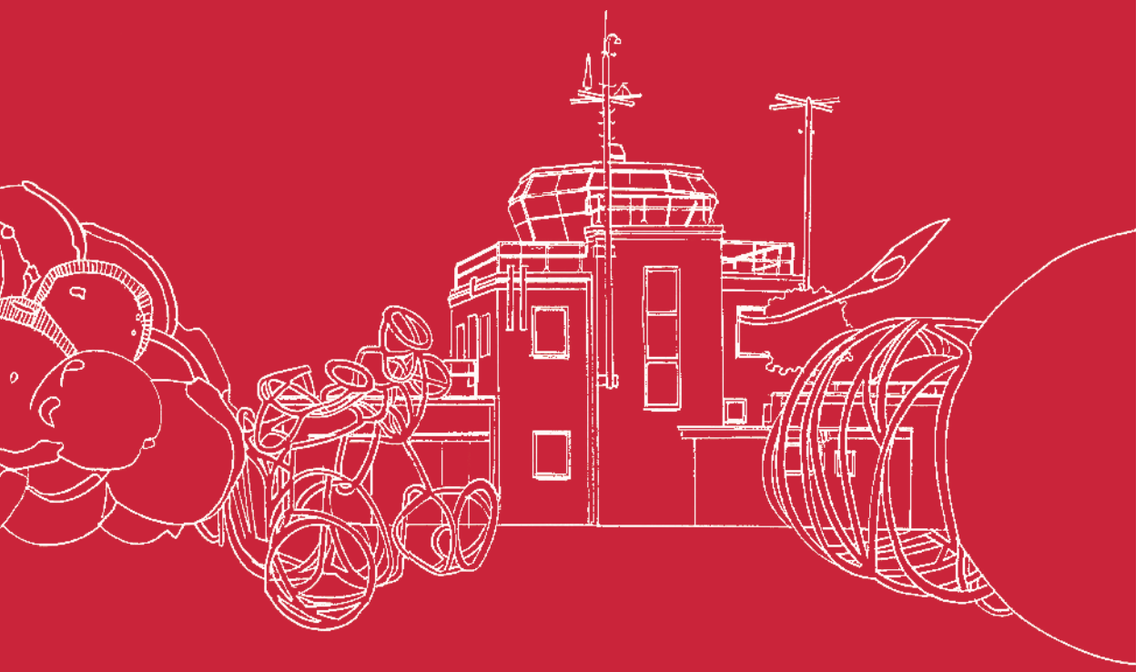

JOHN SCHOFIELD

# Cellular Archaeology

The former RAF station and later Cold War US airbase at Greenham Common has long been a contested place. The landscape here resonates with contradictions and with conflict: the Common, with its implication of openness and collegiality, versus the fenced and divided territories of militarized space; the order and monumental architecture within the fence, versus the free will of those beyond it, marking their space with temporary and transient structures, conducting alternative rituals and free-form artistic expression. The Peace Women who occupied space beyond the fence attempted to subvert the authority and order of those within—painting fence posts and marking the fences with woven webs and patterns. They lived their lives in camps, named after colors and each with distinctive social characteristics. Caroline Blackwood described the camp at Yellow or Main Gate as having a "special urban desolation that made it grimmer than the rest," while Green Gate (est. 1983), which she called the Camp of Intellectuals, possessed of a "cosmic" atmosphere. There was also a camp at Musicians' Gate and one at Blue Gate, which developed a reputation as comprising "tough, rowdy youngsters." The Peace Women who occupied the camps consider these locations "sacred," while others consider them "scarred" by either the presence of militarism or the Peace Camps, or both. Either way it is a diverse landscape richly woven with complex (hi)stories.

Greenham's history runs deeper, however, than just the Second World War and Cold War periods. Stone Age artifacts were found here, and military encampments are recorded in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But it is surviving remains of the late twentieth century that are remarkable. Within the fence is the former technical site of the airbase, now a business park. The former airfield has returned to common land, but a section of runway has been retained as a bizarre memorial to this recent history. The control tower also survives, as does, spectacularly, GAMA (Ground-launched cruise missile Alert and Maintenance Area), six massive concrete shelters, and various bits of associated infrastructure, all now protected as a Scheduled Monument. Beyond the fence are subtler traces of the camps: the painted fence posts, artifacts scattered in the woods, and the earthwork traces of habitation areas, including leveled areas for tents (benders) and hearths. Finally, there is the fence itself, a key and characteristic monument of the Cold War, uniquely representative of a central conflict within Cold War geopolitics, not between East and West but among those in the West who disagreed over nuclear (dis)armament.

## Archaeology of the Contemporary Past

Greenham also has a place in the development of an increasingly significant and popular branch of archaeology: archaeology of the contempo-


rary past. This archaeological approach takes no account of time depth; it recognizes that conventional archaeological methods as well as conceptual and theoretical frameworks can be applied to periods of living memory, just as they can to the deeper past. The methods archaeologists use can reveal and record traces of a Stone Age campsite on the Common *and* a camp site abandoned twenty years ago, or even yesterday. It can be done. Some skeptics might argue, what is the point? This was a question raised following a presentation, made locally, to raise funds for the contemporary archaeological project at Greenham. I paraphrase, "Why would you want to record the locations of crisps bags and old bottle tops?" "For two reasons," I replied (not convincingly—we did not get funding). "One, what we consider the familiar past is not so familiar when we start to examine it in closer detail. Examples abound of archaeological projects that seek to study things we think we know all about, only to be surprised by the results. Two, sometimes what matters is not what we find but the process of doing the work. In this case fieldwork might provide the opportunity for people with an interest in Greenham, or with personal connections to the site, to come together, to meet, talk and cooperate in something that would be fun and perhaps—in some ways—cathartic for those involved." That, at least, was the plan.

What actually happened was rather different, partly because of a lack of significant funding, and partly because our approach to Greenham changed, something I return to below. But fieldwork was achieved, due largely to Council for British Archaeology (CBA) funding, which allowed a small and cross-disciplinary team to focus on one of the camps. Here the study is described briefly.

## Mapping Turquoise Gate

In a project directed by Yvonne Marshall and supported by the University of Southampton and the CBA Challenge Fund grant, work was undertaken at Turquoise Gate, a camp established in December 1983 by women from Blue Gate seeking a separate vegan zone. It was among the shortest lived of the Greenham camps, and was occupied intermittently by small numbers of women. The work was in three stages.

First, we mapped topography, vegetation, and all visible cultural features and artifacts. We identified a concentration of protest-related artifacts, which as a second stage we subjected to more detailed, intensive survey, recording and collecting by square meter all objects exposed on the ground surface. We identified two clear features at this second stage: the base of a scrap wood structure, and a large fire pit. Some 150 objects were recovered including car parts, bricks, concrete, tiles, wood, wire, plastic sheeting, plastic bags, clothing, wrappers, cans, bottles, kitchen utensils, toys, and pharmaceuticals. The personal, domestic nature of many of these items ties them strongly to the occupants of the camp, and one—a discarded Smiths crisps wrapper bearing promotional information about the James Bond film *Octopussy*, released in 1983—is definitively placed during the camp's occupation phase. We also recovered a doll's torso, identical to that found in a photograph published around 1985 showing doll body parts attached to the fence. The aim of protestors, some tell us, was to soften the fence; to subvert it, make it look less male, less military, and more ridiculous. This was achieved through acts of transgression and by translating context—putting private things on public view, or creating something exquisite from the rubbish.

As the project developed we came to realize the sensitivity of the camps to the women who had occupied them, and the methodology for our third stage changed as a result. Notably, objects were no longer collected, but recorded in situ and left as found. Three-dimensional point locations were captured for every artifact allowing spatial analyses to be conducted within a Geographical Information System, a project undertaken by Kayt Armstrong.

Not collecting surface artifacts allowed us to cover larger areas and a wider, more extensive survey revealed further hearths, stashed building materials, milk bottles, face cream jars, and the remains of shelters beyond the area originally studied. Some 475 artifacts were recorded in this way, mostly occurring in two clusters that displayed subtle differences in the types of evidence contained—raising the possibility that camp activities could be reconstructed, much as archaeologists describe activity zones at ephemeral occupation sites from early prehistory.

The nature of the objects and their spatial distribution challenged the identity of Turquoise Gate in literary and oral history. It was supposed to have been a camp of vegans, separated from Blue Gate. Yet the boundary between the two sites is not distinct, suggesting some spatial continuity. There were also a significant number of milk bottles on site. Were the women really all vegan, or were they reusing the bottles? Were there children on site who needed milk? Perhaps the identity of the camp was blurred, yet clearer and more distinct in the way women remember it?

Among the many visitors who helped during fieldwork were two former Peace Women, Lorna Richardson and Lynette Edwell. They took us to the small, previously unrecorded camp at Emerald Gate, which they had occupied on various occasions to monitor GAMA. The camp at Emerald





Gate was found intact, with personal utensils and rolled polythene sheeting used for benders still in their original hiding place, or "cache," under gorse bushes. The moment when Lorna Richardson rediscovered her own coffee mug seemed to sum up the Greenham archaeological project and what we had set out to achieve.

## Lucy + Jorge Orta

Given the strong artistic content in many of Greenham's protest actions, it was fitting that artists were part of the fieldwork, contributing to documentation of the site and the process of studying it, and responding to the project as it evolved. Kristin Posehn, then undertaking doctorate research at Winchester School of Art, photographed and filmed the fieldwork process, capturing key moments and significant discoveries. Some of her photographs accompany this essay.

Partnership with Lucy + Jorge Orta extended beyond mere recording and documentation. The artists formed a central part of the research group, contributing thoughts on research focus and direction and, crucially, on the connections between art and archaeology. How might one influence the other, and how might these influences drive the project in new directions, opening up new avenues of inquiry, and new research questions? Much of Orta's previous work examined the social connections within and across communities, and the relationships between individuals and their environments. In the early 1990s, Orta began a series of works that combined architecture, fashion, and social activism to create temporary refuges, prototype survival clothing, portable shelters, and tent villages for emergencies, project outputs that have obvious resonance with events at Greenham.

Lucy Orta and I shared the billing at a 2007 *Situations* conversational event in Bristol. In her contribution Lucy described the emergence of an idea of what her Greenham project might produce. As she said, "One would have expected me to respond with a proposal for a tent village installation, an encampment 'revisited,' or a reenactment of 'Embrace the Base'—the most important of the demonstrations, where 30,000 women linked hands to encircle the base. But as we all know, artists can be pretty unpredictable!"

Lucy described how, in the six months prior to joining the research group, she and her partner Jorge had the opportunity to encounter molecular scientists looking at communication on a genetic level and biologists working in embryonic cell development. What fascinated them then was the process of differentiation, whereby cells specialize and become multipotent with unique functionality. Predicated from Dolly the sheep research in 1997, stem cell lines now can be purposely differentiated from one cell type to another. This "energy transformation," whereby one cell becomes something completely different, was the starting point for a new body of work developing less transient artworks and creating forms that are infinitely mutable or *totipotent*.

Orta's early research on transient architecture conducted throughout *Refuge Wear*, *Body Architecture,* and *Modular Architecture* reflected on the immediate layers surrounding the body. This new research would allow them to lead away from the scale and intimacy of the individual and into the context of a wider socio-urban environment.

The space that most intrigued Lucy during her site visit to Greenham was the Control Tower, the highest control point overlooking GAMA's missile shelters and the surrounding common. As the tower currently lies vacant and its future uncertain, would it be possible, she wondered, to transform this highly symbolic building into something with renewed artistic potential? The proposal she and Jorge presented to the group was an idea to draw up plans for the Greenham Common Visitors Center, a place where histories converge, a space for archives, data, and oral histories to become public. The Control Tower thus became the artists' space of intervention where they could investigate totipotency, searching for a new life, a new body.

## Conclusion

In *Lucy Orta, Process of Transformation*, Cristina Morozzi described how cells are part of the human body:

"[Cells] are at the origin of its being, its feelings, its emotions and its sufferings. Thus, they speak the language of the body. There are also cells of habitation. The relationship between people and their habitat is formed in this metaphorical cell. Living and being become a single and unique life experience…. The term cell is also used to indicate political and social groups; groups of people cemented together by the same ideals, convictions and striking power. They represent a social context struggling for change."[1]

The historical, social, and geographical context, that is to say the reality, in which the artist intervenes, takes on a certain importance when it is the subject of vision; it is a "cell," and in so being, is a part of the body.

Greenham has become a *cause celebre* in contemporary archaeology: a key project in defining and scoping archaeologies of the contemporary past, demonstrating that it can be done. In time it may also exemplify the benefits of exploring the collaborative partnership of artists with archaeologists/historians, not so much for creating a documentation of the past but for analyzing it, deconstructing and critiquing it, and challenging people to engage with history in new and unforeseen ways. Perhaps totipotency is a model for achieving this (a *Cellular Archaeology,* if you will), for analyzing and thinking of places, things, and relationships as "infinitely mutable." Lucy + Jorge Orta's work was central to our collaborative project, a collaboration that ultimately reflected the spirit of Greenham: partnership, collegiality, and creative energy.

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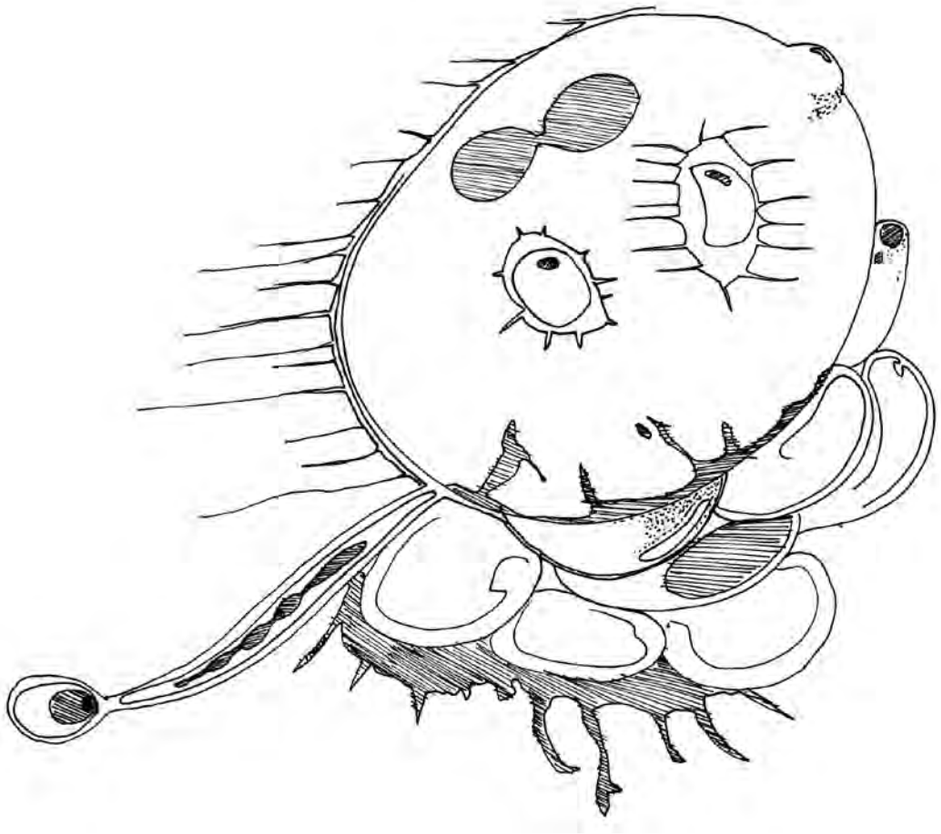
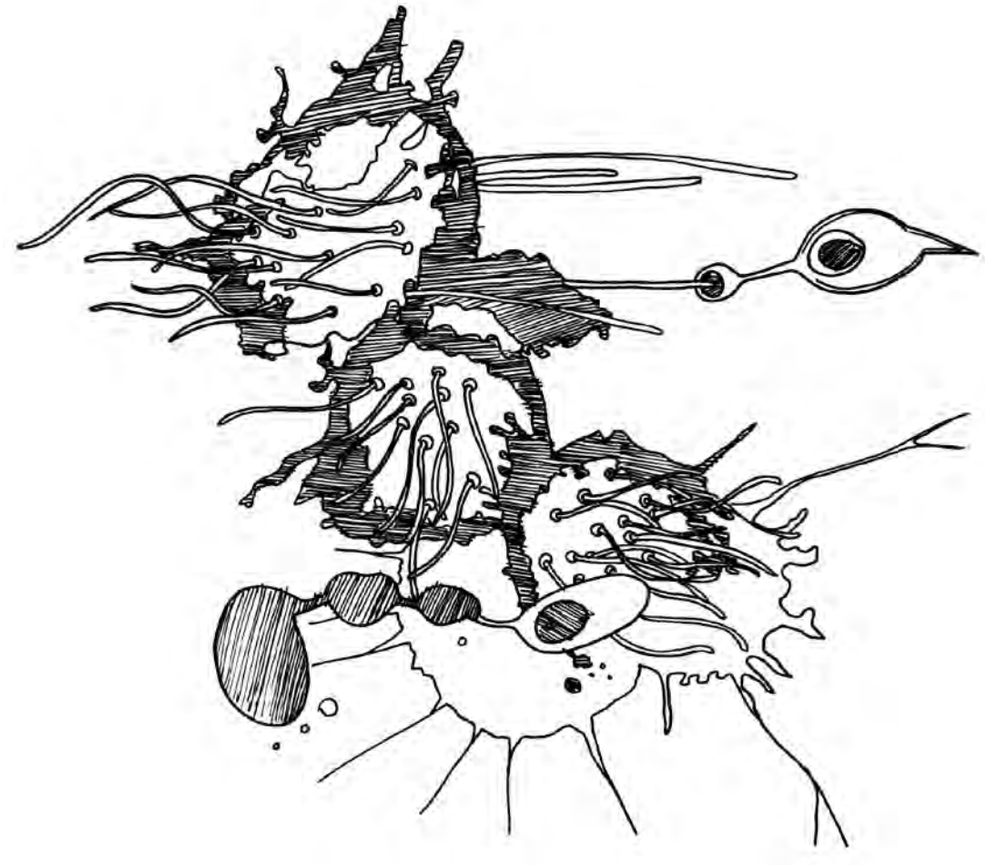
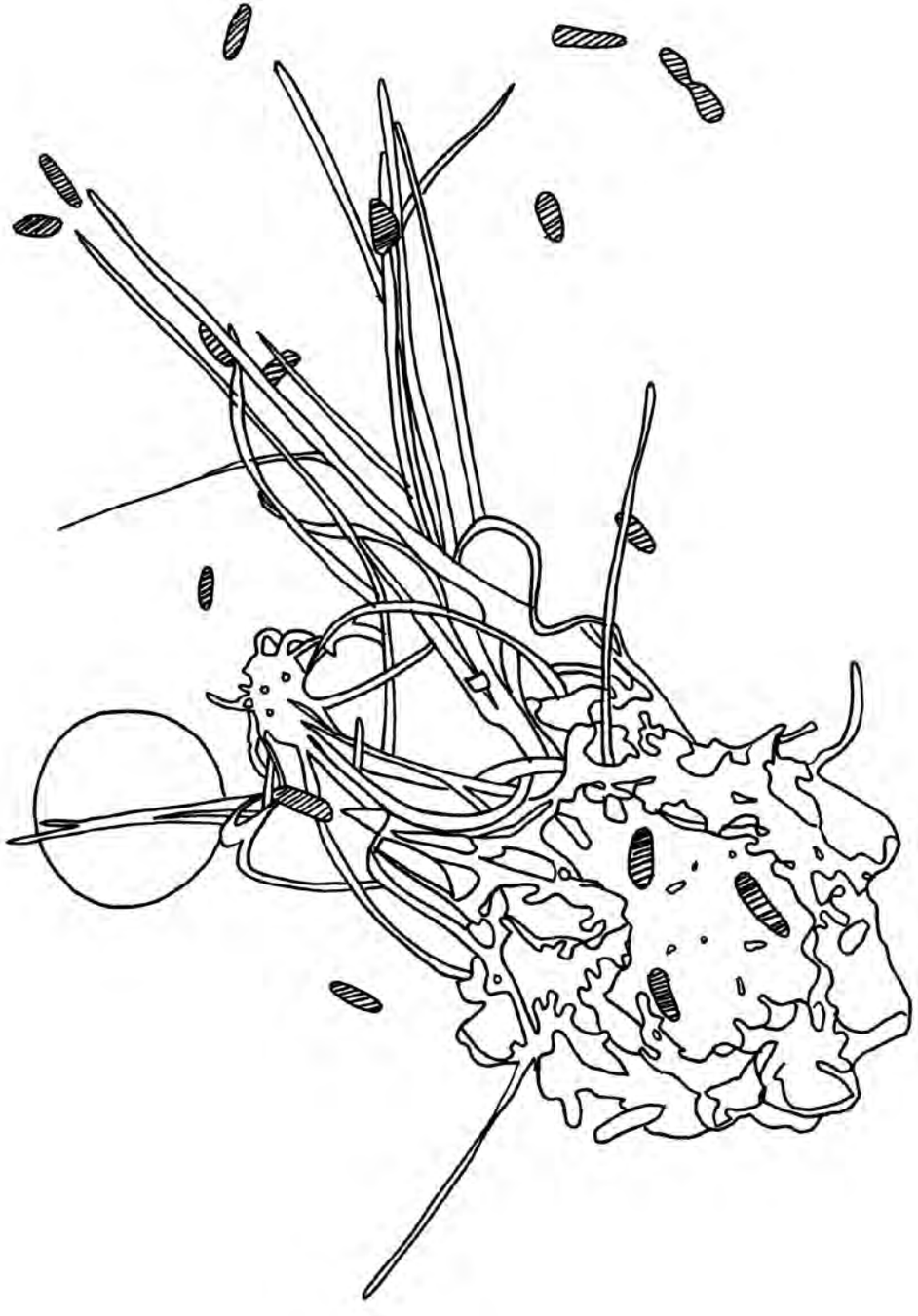
1. Cristina Morozzi, *Lucy Orta: Process of Transformation* (Paris: Editions Jean-Michel Place, 1996).

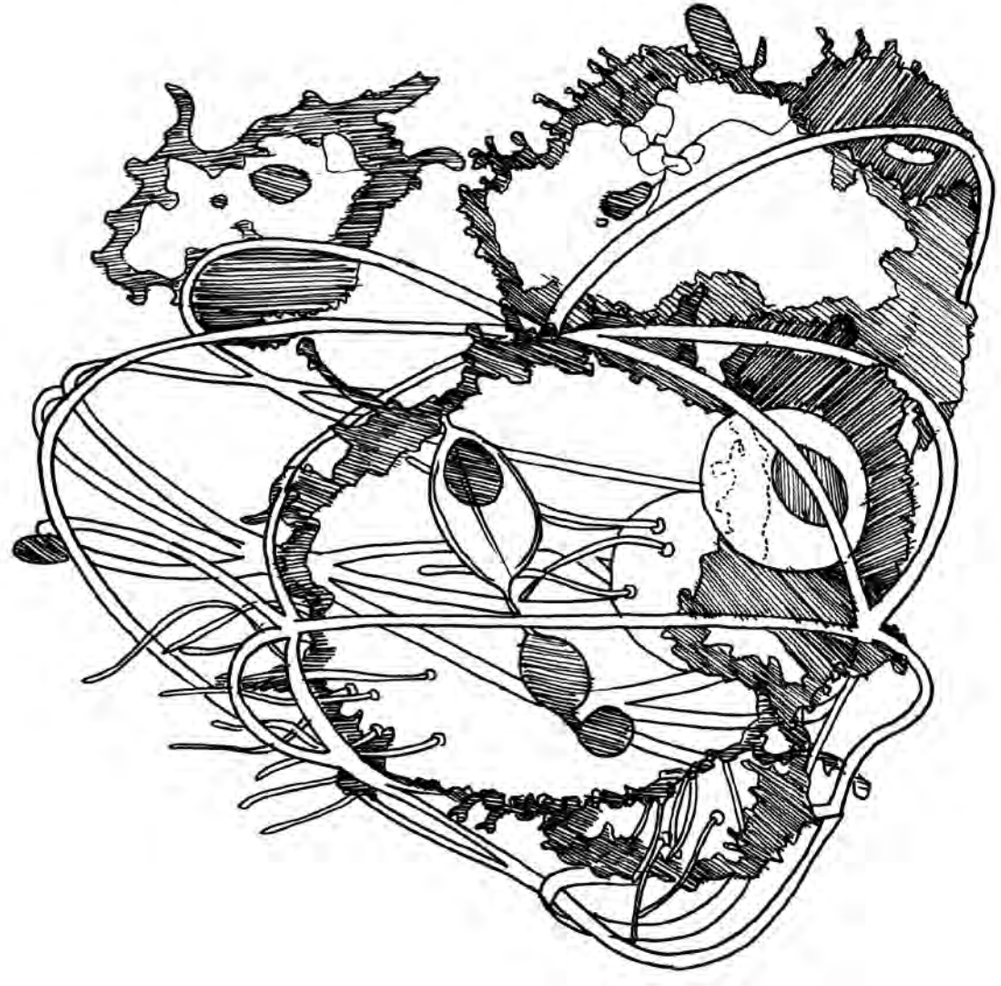


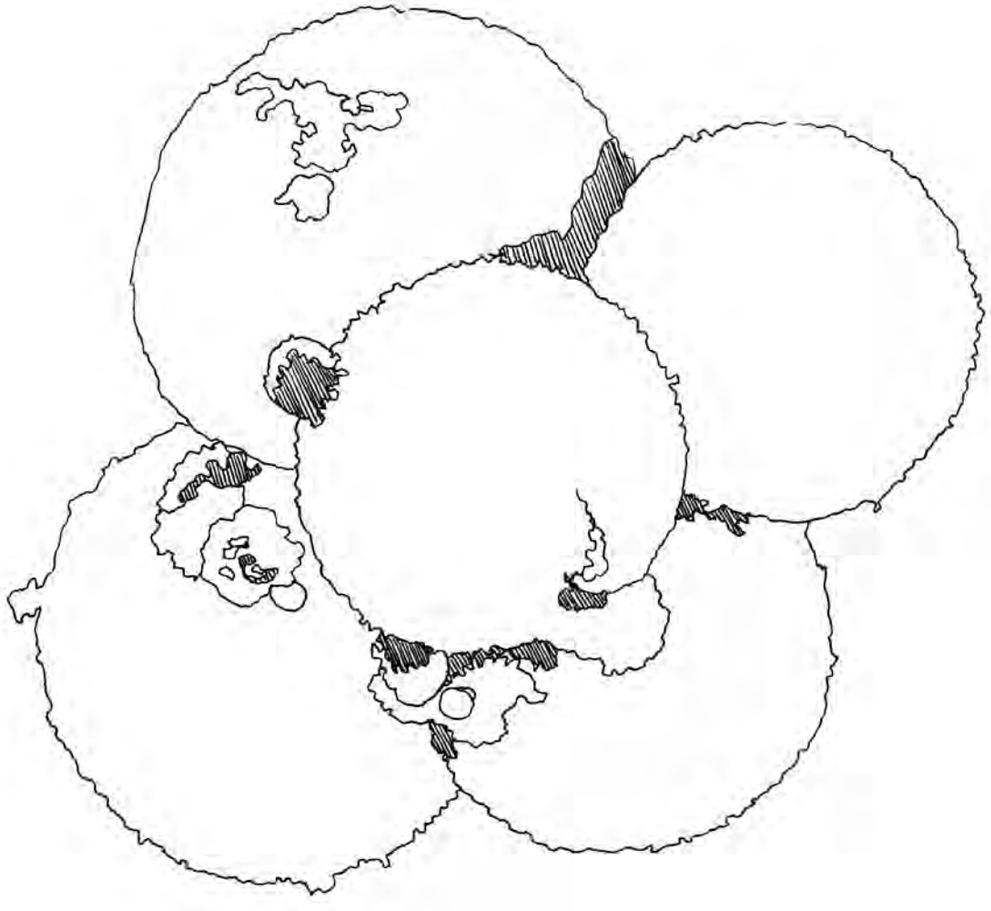


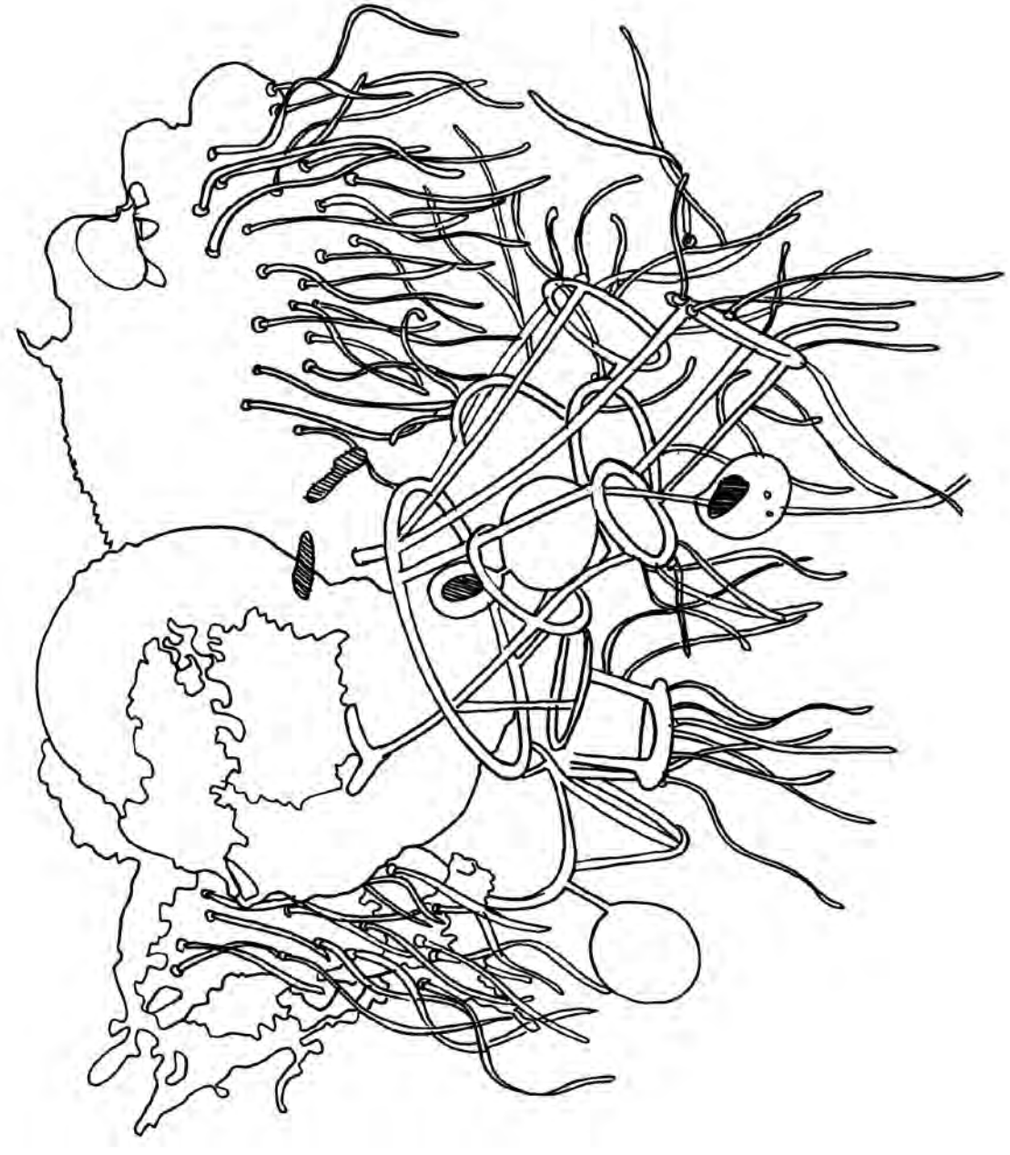
**Totipotent Architecture, 2004-07**
Sketchbook drawings

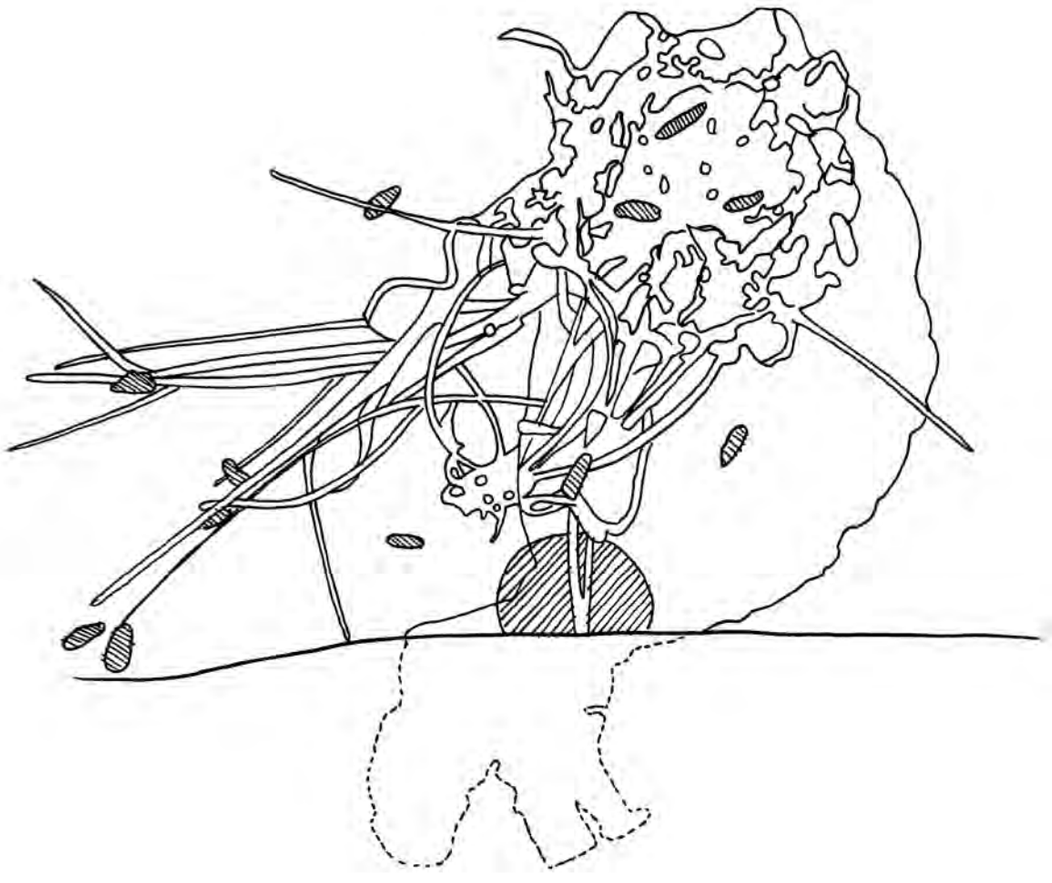




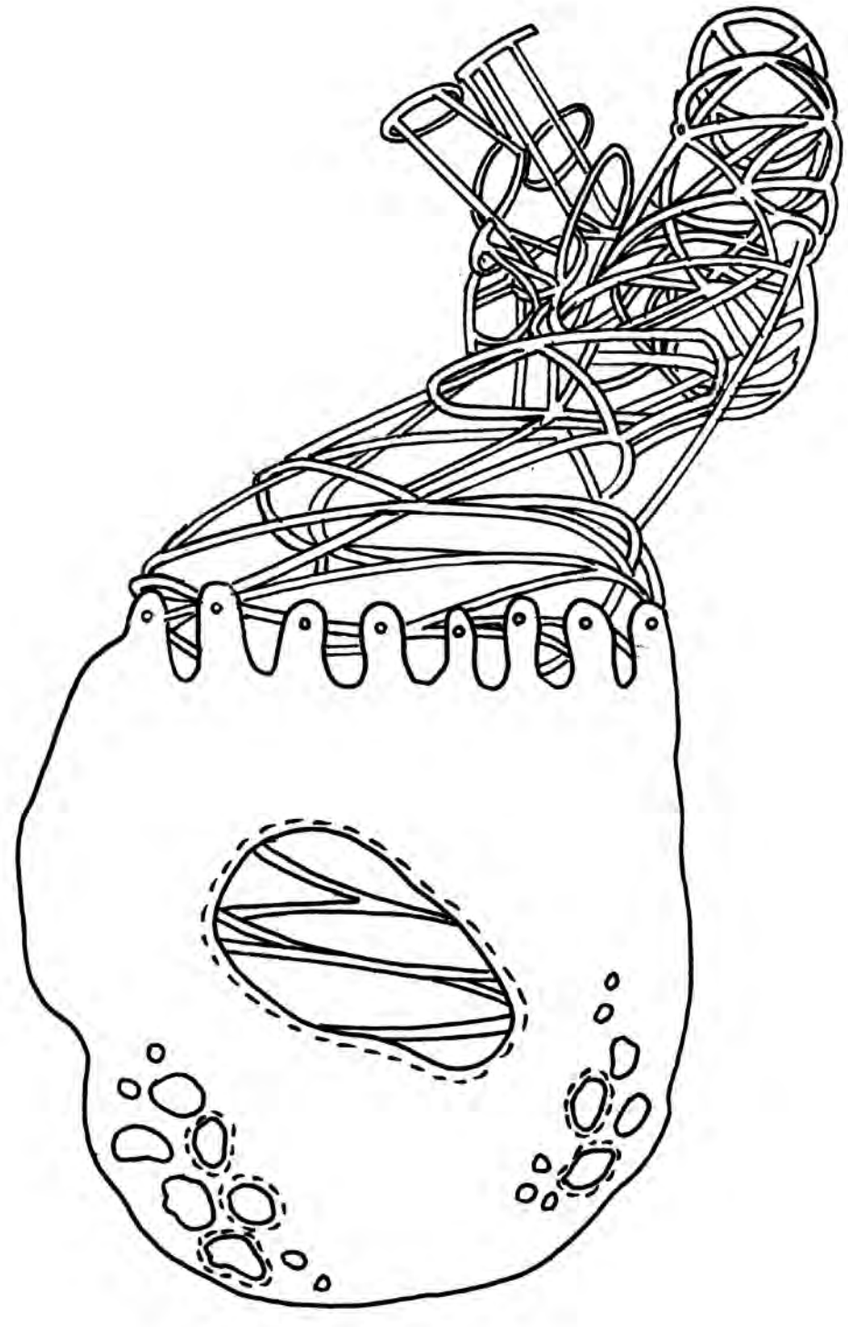


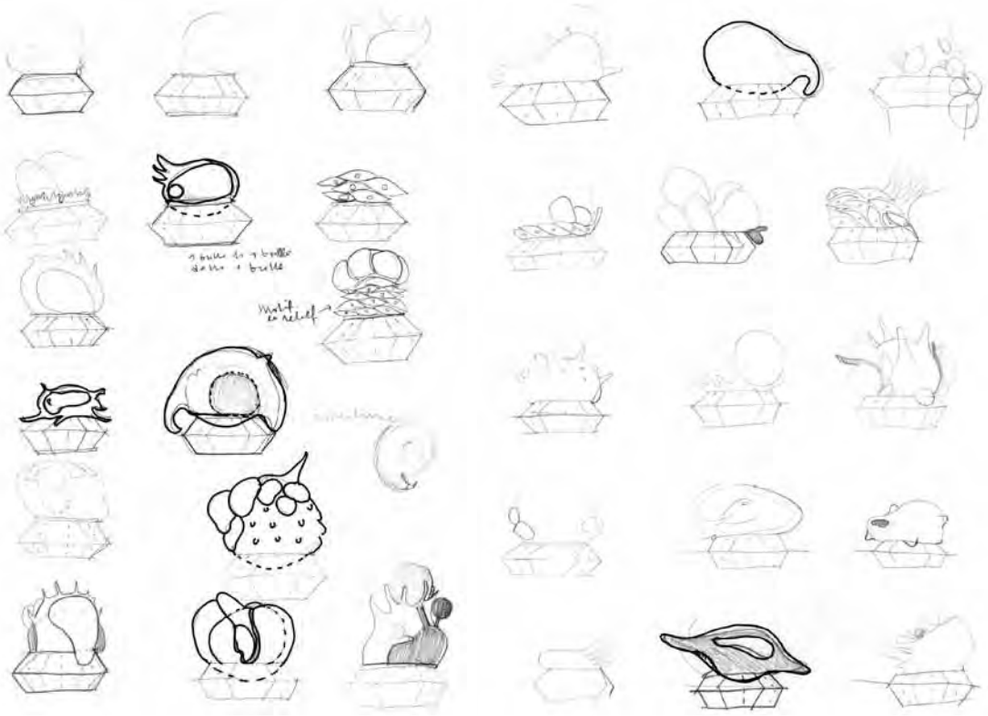


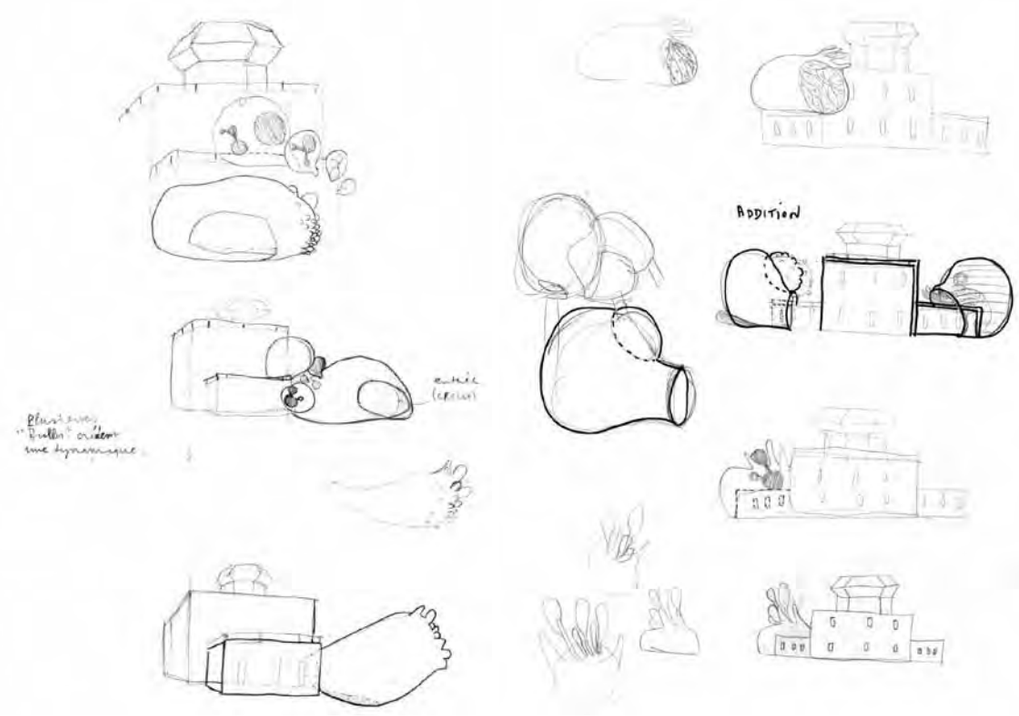


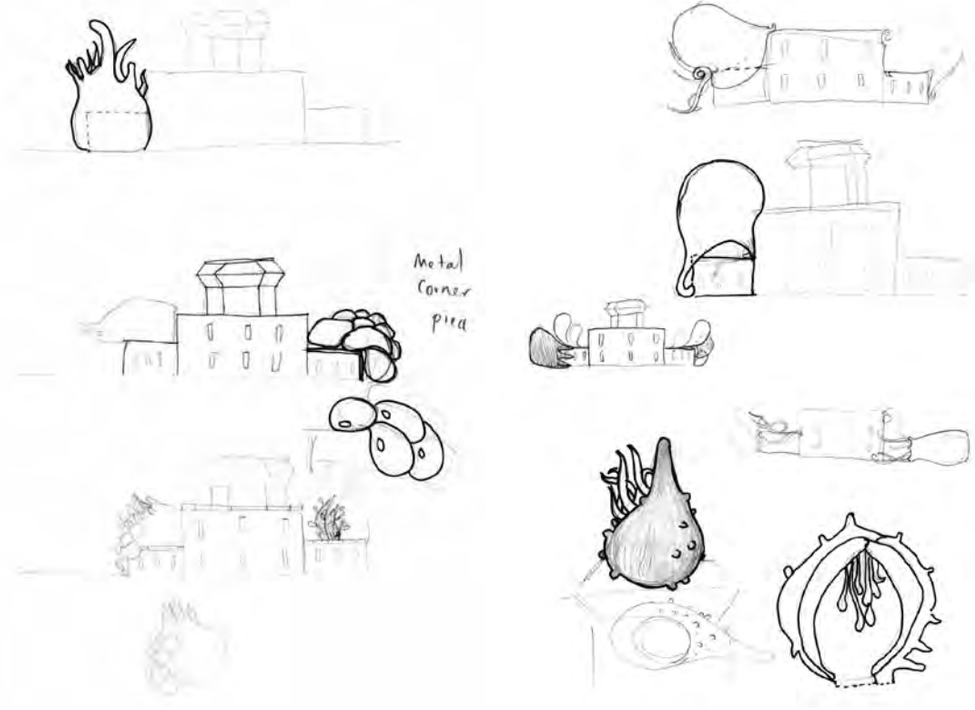




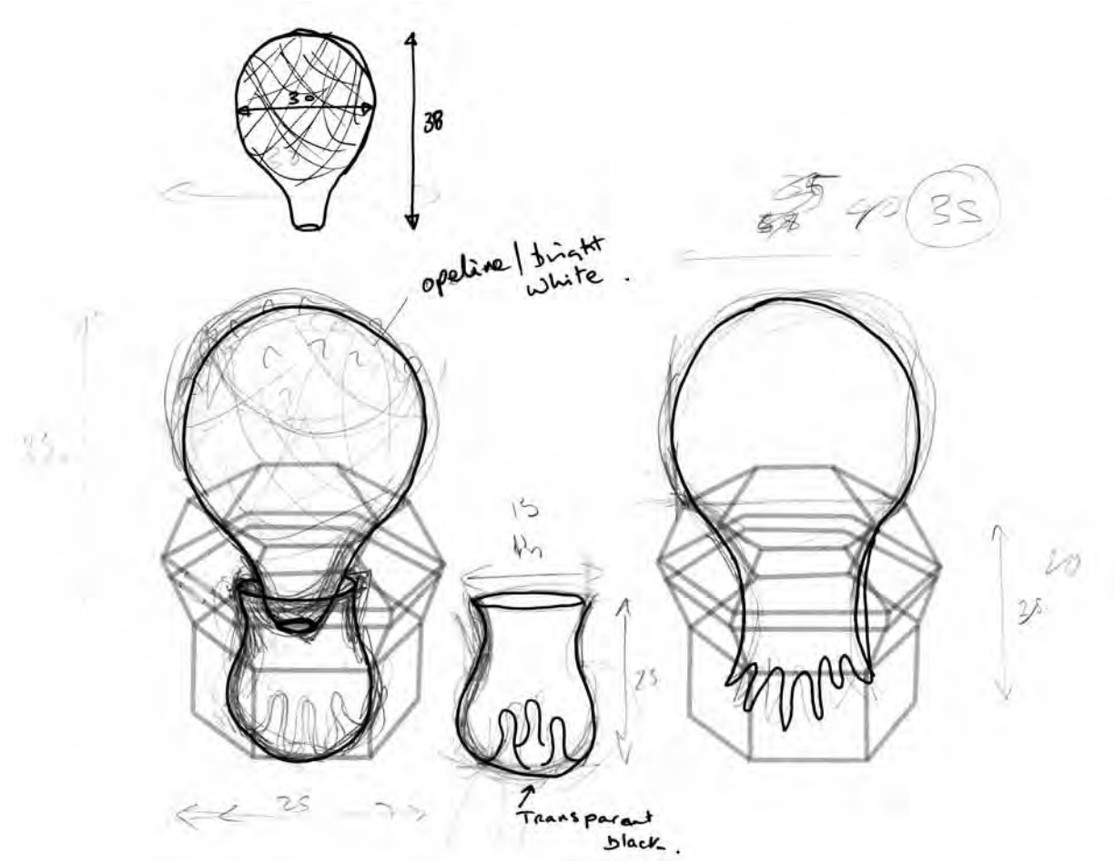






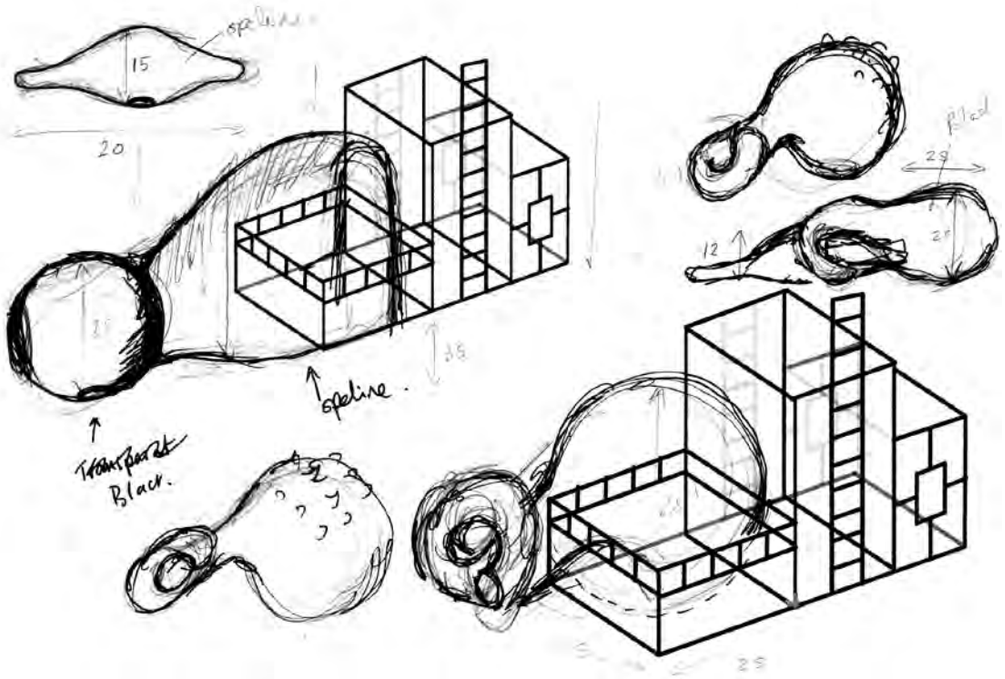




Totipotent Architecture - Greenham Common Control Tower, 2007
Sketchbook drawings




*(left)*
Totipotent Architecture - Control Tower Observatory, 2008
Sketchbook drawing

*(right)*
Totipotent Architecture - Greenham Common Observatory, 2008




*(left)*
Totipotent Architecture - Control Tower Visitor Center, 2008
Sketchbook drawing

*(right)*
Totipotent Architecture - Greenham Common Visitor Center, 2008