REAL MATERIAL ETHEREAL

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Confident Empathy:
Collaborating with Irresolution

Abstract

The research interrogates the potential of unintended occurrences in the design process, showing how these seemingly problematic moments can be harnessed to the benefit of a project. It investigates the concept of 'confident empathy', revealing methods which demonstrate the beauty of collaborations in an architectural discipline where personal egos and styles are often at the forefront of the design process and outcome.

Inquiry into my own design work reveals a distilling process where initial reactional ideas are funneled through negotiation processes as the project becomes infused by different participants. Capacity for empathy for the unknown, such as site, material, builder, and client, serve to compose a subtle but confident architecture; a practice enriched by my personal background of moving through and adapting to various cultures. I argue that confident empathy enables a designer to venture into the unknown and is essential to a successful design process. Key areas of exploration within the research include encountering and resolving irresolutions through a responsive and open yet definitive approach. Confident empathy employs negotiating methods of 'question & try', 'forming relationships' and 'discovering integrity' leading to eventual outcomes that are not intrusive, but rather rooted and honest to the location and the people involved.

The aim of this research is to advocate for the versatility and strength of empathy in working through irresolutions in the design process, and to contribute to the discussions around negotiating methods and mechanisms as part of collaborative project development. Embracing these unintended occurrences invites surprising and joyful relationships with outcomes which are created with an ensemble of imperfections. As a result of this design process, the architecture can be seen to enrich the use and perspectives of participants beyond the completion of the building as it has been enriched by them.

Introduction

Something has always bothered me about practising in the architecture discipline. There seems to be an underlying tone that one has to be 'the principal designer' on the team to claim any real credit. Even when I started this research, I felt there was an unwritten pressure that to do 'practice-based research' it was necessary to be the principal designer, discounting the value of all the rest of us on the team working away. Although attitudes in the architecture discipline are changing with more firms engaging in joint ventures and recognizing the collaborations of various disciplines, for many years, 'starchitects' have dominated the field. In other words, it is often about the architect, the designer, a single person. There is value in that as I have been inspired by past masters and their visions. Perhaps pursuing the individual identity is why I chose to enter the architecture world. However, after being in practice for over a decade, I realised the beauty of this discipline is in fact elsewhere. An architect, never works alone. You are either working in an office for someone, or you are the principle of a team, or you run an office solo but have your builders and consultants. You are always working with others.

Jeremy Till writes and speaks about the messiness of architectural practice. He recognizes that architects deal with complicated sets of negotiations and find it necessary to approach the contingency nature of the mess with a positive attitude.[1] Eric Owen Moss, whose architectural work and attitude are often frank and dynamic, spoke about his design process in one of his monographs, "I think what I want is for architecture to deal with personal map making because it's the only subject." [2] Speaking further to this, "Nothing is very neat. The problems of living are overlapping."[3] In detailing where he does not follow perfection but rather bluntly exposes these moments at the edges, he adds, "The ideology ought to be that there's no ideology."[4]

Architecture could find better ways to celebrate the beauty of collaborative negotiation, by recognizing the difficulties and the various participants without losing the integrity of individual opinions and contributions as this can lead to an outcome that is fulfilling for clients, users and all participants and ultimately becomes the embodiment of the process. This research argues that one way to achieve this is by embracing unintended occurrences and the unknown actors such as different opinions, site conditions, client, builder and budget through applying the concept of what I call 'confident empathy'.

Empathy in design is now commonly known as "a user-centered design approach", which often uses methods of observing and collecting large amounts of data from a targeted audience, then analyzing and testing against them[5]. The idea of empathy was first

introduced by a German scholar, Robert Vischer, in the 1870s. He formulated the idea of empathy in an attempt to analyse how the imagination works in understanding intuitions around aesthetics and form. The key principles of his notion of empathy involve deeper and deliberate ways of seeing rather than it being an unconscious act. He explains that when a person sees an object that triggers a response, there is the "immediate sensation", the initial sensory stimulation, followed by a more physical and bodily feeling, "responsive sensation", leading to "attentive feeling" which generates empathy[6]. Furthermore, imagination is crucial in forming "a kinetic, volitional, empathetic sensation" from "immediate sensation" and "responsive sensation"[7]. Interestingly, some historians would consider Vischer's sensation of empathy as "irrational" because a person can transpose into the object, suggesting that a person becomes one with the object, which can be interpreted as a more mystical process. Harry Francis Mallgrave and Eleftherios Ikonomou wrote about the subject, "Vischer's notion of empathy becomes a transcendental process; it is a pure, free animation of form in which the self, becomes annihilated by its own activity." [8]

Louis Kahn, whose projects appear strictly planned and executed, in his writings and lectures often spoke of the emotional nature of his design process. He reflected on how the spirit of architecture and the elements of architecture fall into their natural place and the role that empathy plays in the process.[9]

> "Empathy, for instance, is a realization of in-common-ness – that which is true of all men. In-common-ness is not just common place. It is a kind of transcendency, commonness in transcendence…. This is not accomplished by a committee or by many people. It is the work of a single person right from the start and supported with unquestioning enthusiasm because it is so true to existence itself."[10]

Within the play of light and shadow he searched for the organization of the relationships of various elements, either institutional, material, or reflecting human relationships. Through his work and writings, he spoke of buildings being true to nature, materials and elements doing what they are meant to be. In a conversation with his students in 1968, Kahn stated "architecture really does not exist. Only a work of architecture exists. A man who does a work of architecture does it as an offering to the spirit of architecture... a spirit which knows no style, knows no techniques, no method. It just waits for that which presents itself."[11]

Samuel Mockbee of Rural Studio truly embraced and relied on the involvement of various participants. Rural Studio is an architecture practice of collaboration with students, teachers and communities in need, where empathy would be central to communication. He trusted the participants and the collaborative process that led to wonderful outcomes that are deeply rooted and developed from place and people.

> "The best way to make real architecture is by letting a building evolve out of the culture and place. The small projects designed by students at the studio remind us what it means to have an American architecture without pretense. They offer us a simple glimpse into what is essential to the future of American architecture, its honesty."[12]

This research investigates how 'confident empathy' performs through the design process, revealing methods which demonstrate the beauty of collaborations in an architectural discipline where personal egos and styles are often at the forefront of the outcome. It explores the potential of unintended occurrences in the design process, showing how these moments, seemingly problematic (frustrating/uncertain/failing), can be harnessed to the benefit of a project's development. The research is based on an inquiry into my own design work, which has revealed a distilling process where initial ideas are funneled through negotiation process as the project become infused by various participants. Capacity for 'confident empathy' becomes critical in the moments of infusion by the unknowns, as it leads towards composing an extracted essence into an outcome that is not intrusive, but a subtle and confident new project. This is a practice enriched by my personal background of moving through and adapting to various cultures.

Background

I grew up in metropolitan Tokyo Japan, with an artistic mother and studious father. I left home to study in the United States, where I completed my college education, received my Bachelor's degree from North Carolina State University (NCSU) and my Master's degree from Southern California Institute of Architecture (Sci-Arc). I worked for Michael Sorkin Studio in New York, OMA in Rotterdam, Asymptote Architecture in New York, and then spent 5 years at Atelier Bow-Wow in Tokyo before relocating to Adelaide. My path to this point gave me the opportunity to experience very different ways of living, studying and working. Growing up in Japan cultured me to be sensitive, polite, and ordered; living in the US was bold, loud, and disruptive. NCSU provided a strong, straight-forward architectural education, Sci-Arc was Hollywood. Michael Sorkin Studio worked with beautiful hand sketches of ideal worlds which stayed on paper, while OMA was an intense production of beautiful compositions with absolutely no compromise. Atelier Bow-Wow was clever, witty and humorous, exploring compromise to meet reality. These different work environments have exposed me to various design processes with different priorities, values and agendas.

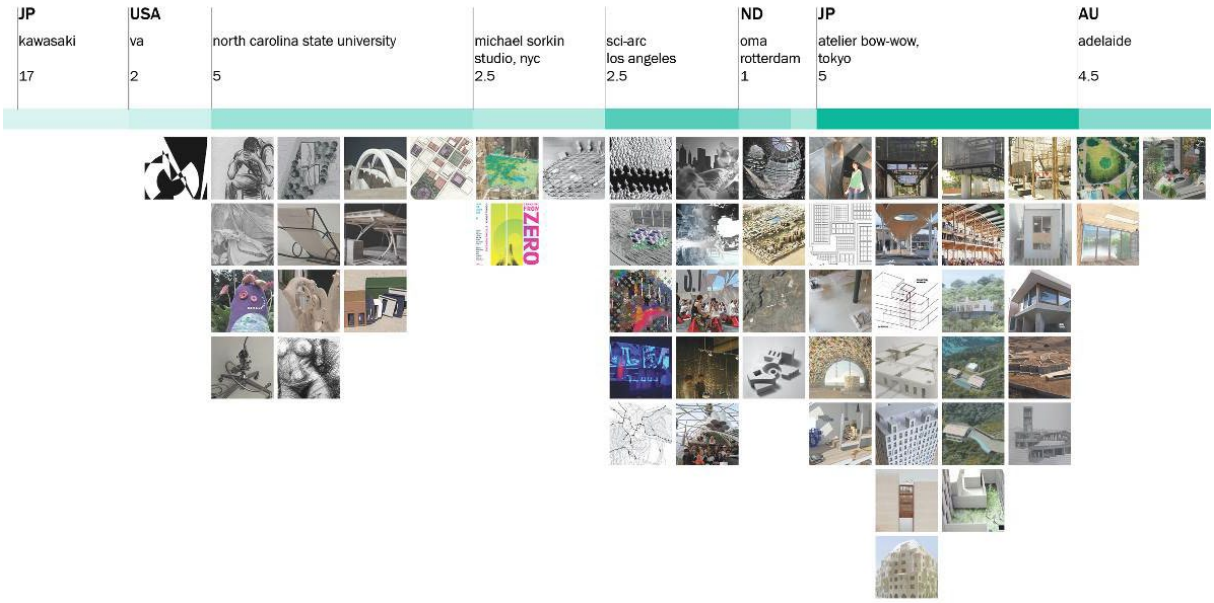

Figure 1. Background timeline of my architecture experience. © Author

Beneath all my decisions, life and work lies the fundamental influence of my mother. My mother had a unique way of seeing the world. I called her a 'natural born artist' whose perspective was always slightly different from others without realizing that it was. She had a strong and determined character. She was so strong of mind, in the later part of life as her body deteriorated, she lived fully with her mind. She was also curious about the world, about different cultures and people. What was most remarkable about her was that she was completely realistic and accepting about who she was. In order to let go of ego and be accepting of others, the first and most critical principle is total understanding and acceptance of oneself, both strengths and weaknesses. In other words, in order to activate empathy, one needs to first be able to let go of oneself, egos and preconceptions, and to do that, one has to be fully self-aware. This she did so naturally and powerfully, and without theorizing it, I believe this is the key to unlocking the empathy gateway.

Figure 2. My mother's paintings. © Author

Another key influencer of my architectural approach is my previous practice experience. Working at Atelier Bow-Wow was an absolute privilege and gave me the knowledge and confidence as the designer I am now. I was extremely lucky to have fallen into this office as my very versatile background did not fit the typical Japanese architecture and culture. They trusted and challenged me to contribute to their body of architectural work while I felt that they taught me considerably more than just architecture. They are not in pursuit of ideology nor neatness, but rather strive to challenge the organizations of programs and requirements through their architecture. Often working with very small limited spaces in an urban context, there was considerable overlapping of spaces, sometimes the entire space was an overlap over an overlap. Atelier Bow-Wow is one of the very few offices I have encountered that is internationally successful but does not have an enormous ego. Instead it accepts and welcomes collaborations at various levels which produce outcomes that are intelligent, subtle and beautiful. In their book *Behaviorology*, they state of their architecture, “When one is surrounded by and synchronized to the livable rhythms embedded in different behaviors - there is no experience quite so delightful.”[13] During the five years I spent in Atelier Bow-wow, I worked on amazing projects amongst a group of highly intelligent and positive people, eating meals together at a same table in a house/office filled with aromas from the kitchen where interns were roasting a chicken or baking apple crumble. This was undeniably an experience I would not want to replace with anything else.

All these versatile experiences, which are seemingly unrelated, have contributed to my ability to negotiate various scenarios with confidence. I aspire to an architecture with texture and materiality rather than smoothness and cleanliness. “Street smart” rather than “book-smart”. Collaborating with irresolution is what I see as the crucial excitement driving a successful outcome; the necessary tension to find purpose in a project. However, I argue that the irresolutions need to be resolved with attention to detail and through rigorous questioning of what happens when different materials/matters meet and why. What binds process and space, action and program, form and structure, material and function, site and volume, as well as intent and outcome together, is forming relationships and solution with integrity. In order to discover integrity, adaptive processes and thinking are necessary to tailor the design intent in dealing with the various challenges such as program, budget, regulation, structure, site condition, material characteristics, detailing, and craftsmanship faced by a designer throughout the design.

Distilling Process

Inquiry into my own design work reveals a distilling process where initial reactional ideas are funneled through negotiation processes as the project becomes infused by different

conditions and participants. Capacity for empathy for the unknown, such as site, material, builder, and client, serve to compose an extracted essence of the unknown into a subtle but confident existence; a practice enriched by my personal background of moving through and adapting to various cultures. Empathy enables the designer to venture into the unknown and is essential to this process.

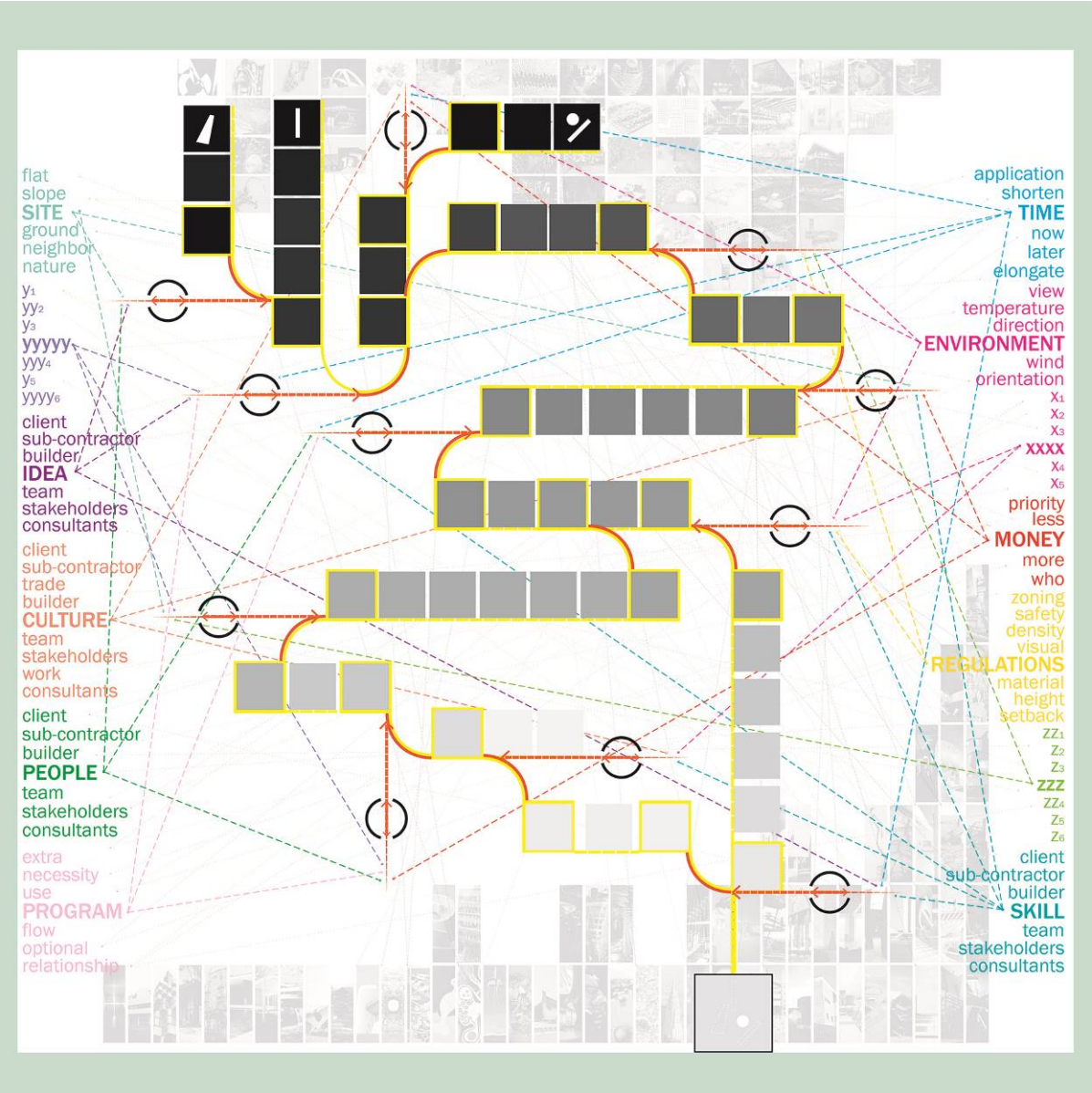

Figure 3. The Distilling Process. © Author

Architects undertake a wide range of tasks towards the delivery of a built outcome. These are constantly evolving with time as the demands become increasingly critical due to many factors including the globalized mass information available to the general population. Architects need to be able to deliver at different levels by formulating proposals through formal gestures and structural solutions that function within tight compliance requirements,

financial constraints and critical socio-cultural review, as well as manoeuvering between innovative technologies and traditional modes of working. In dealing with these different scenarios, there are many moments in which architects are faced with unintended problems that need resolving during the design and construction process. This is encountering irresolution. In this distilling process, the seeming failure of a straight forward chronological project delivery is, in fact, a critically essential part of the design process. Further, managing these troubles and shifts is not just key to a project's success, but also contributes to developing an architect's spatial and creative intelligence.

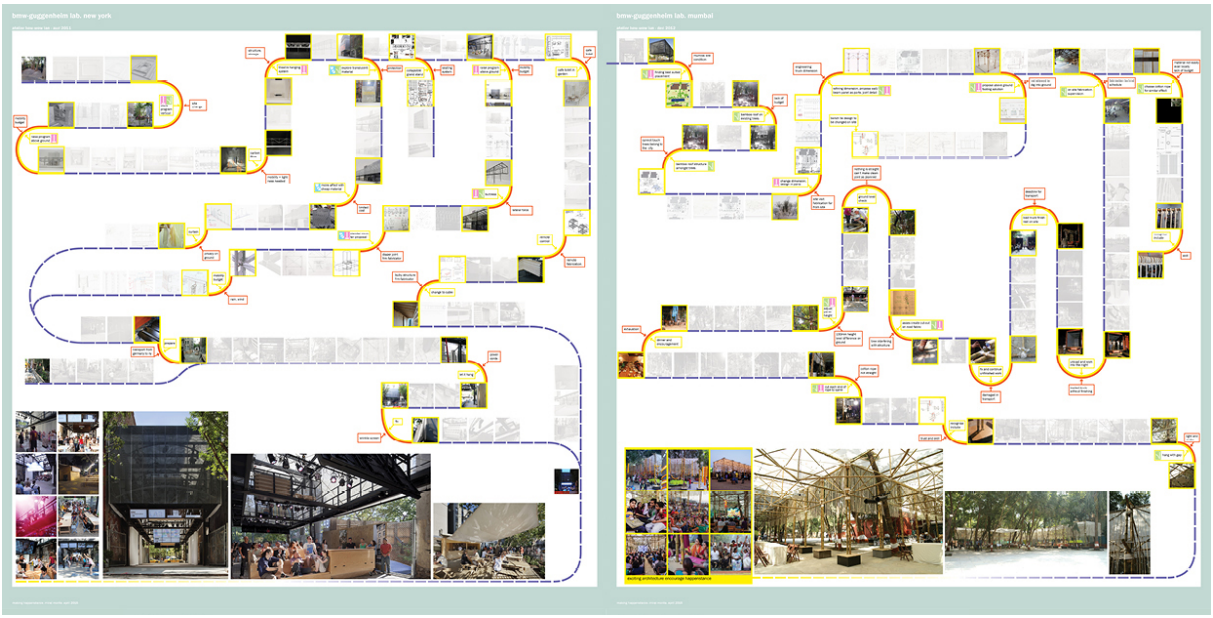

Figure 4. First in the series of project mapping for projects, BMW-Guggenheim Lab in NY and Mumbai, identifying unintended occurrences © Author

What is commonly taken as a fault or mistake is a necessary behaviour to improve one's design skills. Architects cannot know what the project will turn out to be at the beginning, and need to get over the hurdle of not knowing, by displaying intentions that they must manage in the malleable process of seeing them through. During design processes architects demonstrate, document and realize the potentials that others do not or cannot see. As a result of intently navigating through and adapting to various conditions and conflicts, the architect achieves an architectural solution with an integrity that acknowledges the lives and experiences of its occupants and participants. In other words, the outcome is a collaboration of materials and an ensemble of imperfections bound for a purpose, which then encourages collaborations in the spaces created, and the warmth and spirit of intent continue beyond the design.

Figure 5. Project mapping for more recent projects, Tombstone in Japan and Artist Studio in Adelaide, identifying unintended occurrences © Author

Confident Empathy

Determination and curiosity are my compulsion, which was gifted by my mother and enhanced/strengthened by moving through and adapting to various cultures. Empathy is about building relationships and working together. My compulsion for curiosity and determination activates this gateway of empathy, which enables the capacity to see the potential in the unknown. Seeing this potential provides the confidence to collaborate with the unknown.

How 'confident empathy' works is often through a series of 'questioning and trying' conversations. Depending on the complexity of the scenario, they are sometimes less, sometimes more. Through that process I am building personal relationships as well as finding relationships between answers around what is working, how, who and why. With this collaborative negotiation process, the solution with integrity can be found. It is a solution that is free from artificiality, free from any intent to deceive or impress, and is sincere, simple, open and genuine.

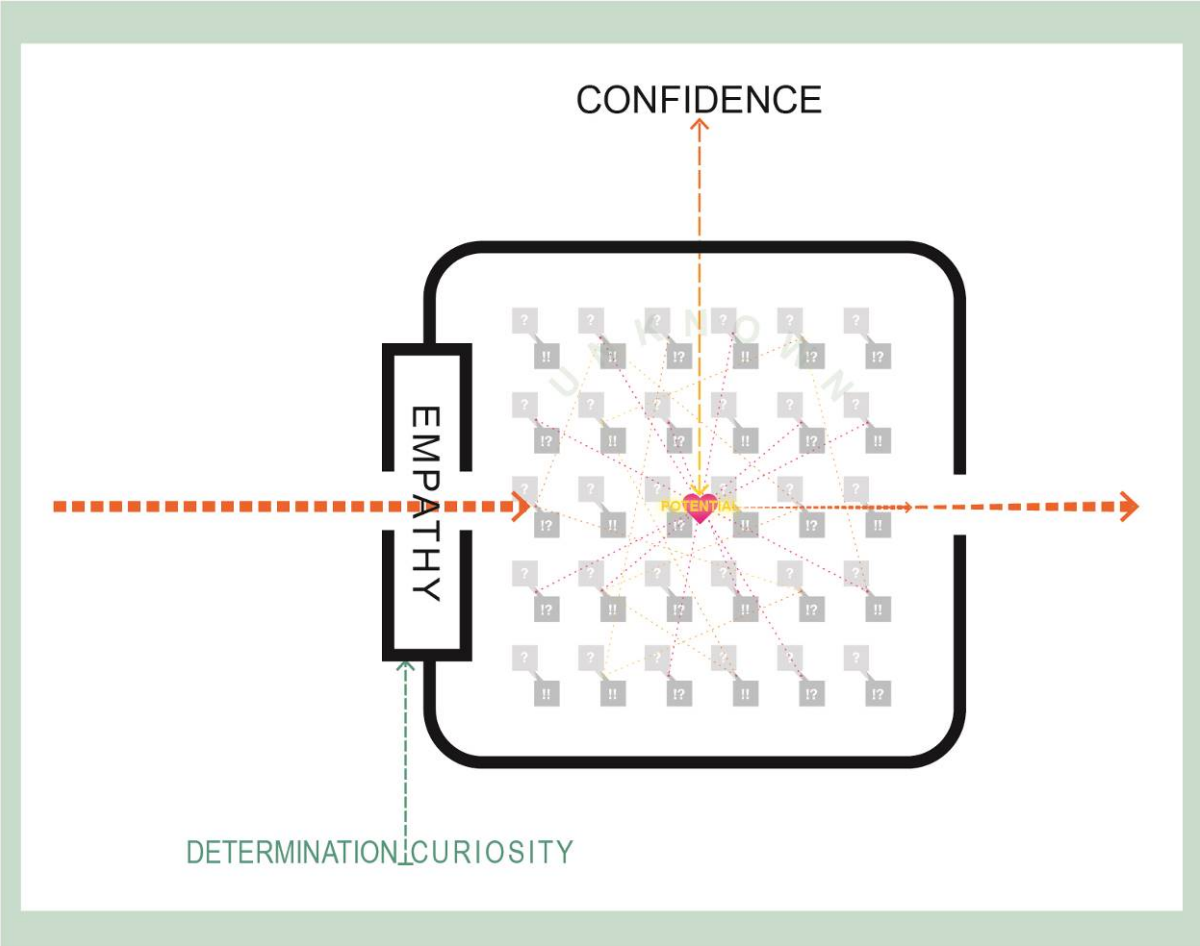

Figure 6. The Confident Empathy. © Author

Confident Empathy in Action

An example of this design approach is the artist studio project I completed in Adelaide in 2016. Even though the project was small, it faced many challenges during the process, mainly relating to cost. The client trusted the architect's vision – my vision – which assisted in making the process more accommodating and encouraging. It was a simple structure, an extension to an existing house. The client's request was to create a sunroom type space on the northern side of their existing house which at the time was overtaken by vegetation. The client was preparing to retire and looking forward to spending more time at home and returning to his creative roots of print-making in a space that is warm and full of sunlight. Having a client who trusted the architect and being able to collaborate with builders who were trained in architecture allowed for a fertile ground to employ 'confident empathy' throughout the process which led to a joyful outcome, treasured by all parties involved.

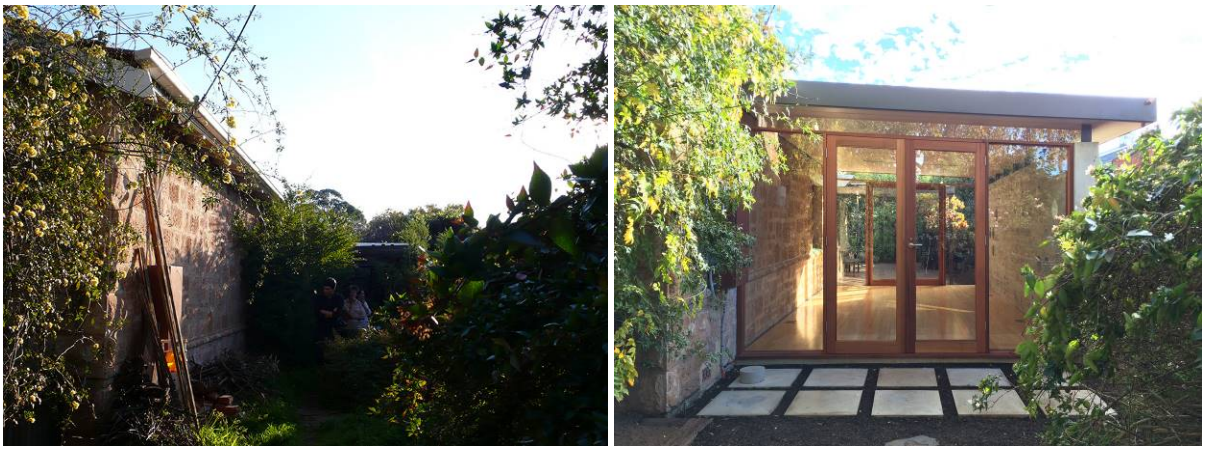

Figure7. Before and after photos of the Artist Studio. © Author

I started the project by having multiple reactional ideas in response to the site conditions and existing house. They were my intuitional and emotional ideas. After presenting them to the client, immediately two out of the three ideas were discounted, with the client choosing my least favourite option. It was the simplest proposal that did not have much flare in my mind. It was a backup idea.

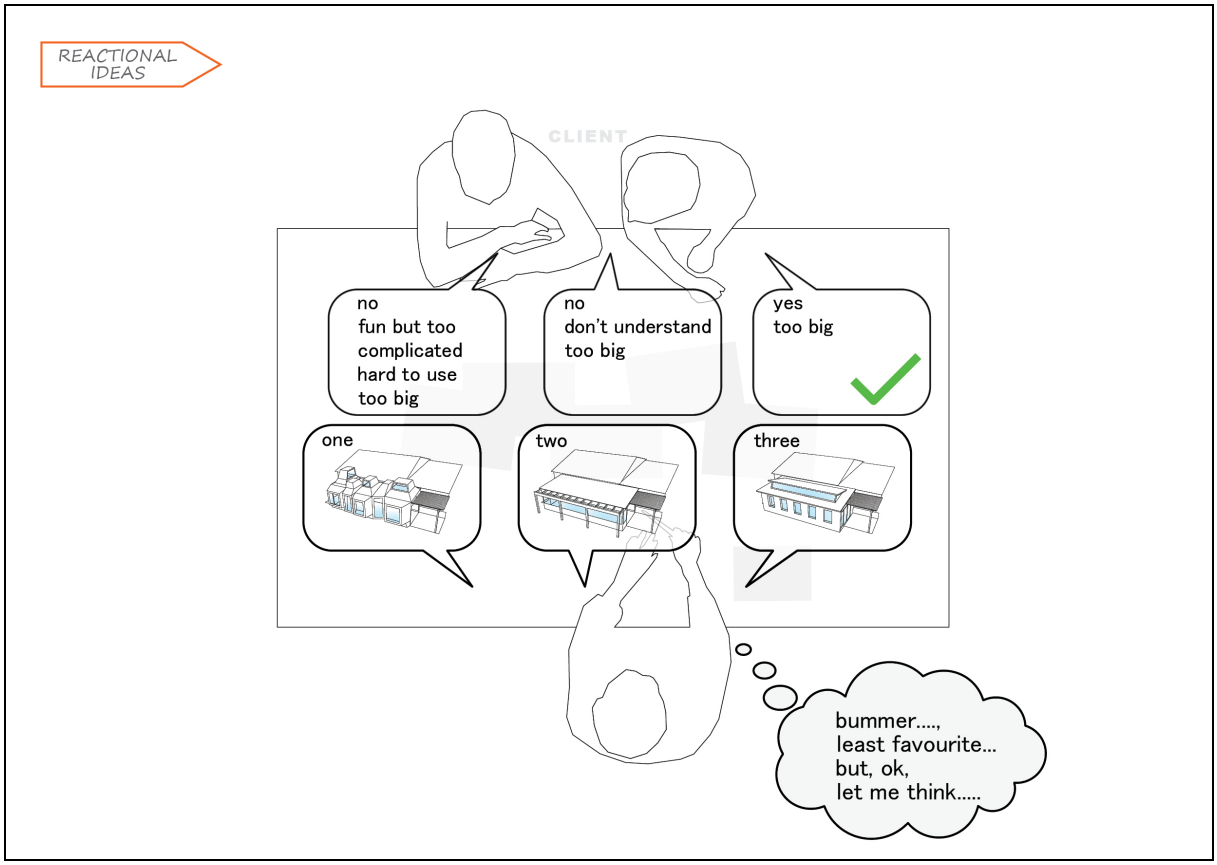

Figure 8. Illustration of start of conversation where architect shares proposals with the client. © Author

Once I recovered from my initial sadness of not being able to do what I wanted, I reviewed the proposal and tried to understand why the option they chose was the best one to move forward with. Questioning why and realizing that this option best suited their life style rather than competing with it, I tried to bring in some elements from the other options. From there, the project became a much simpler design architecturally. There was a roof, a wall and floor, but also a design which provided me with the opportunity to give more attention to materiality and detail.

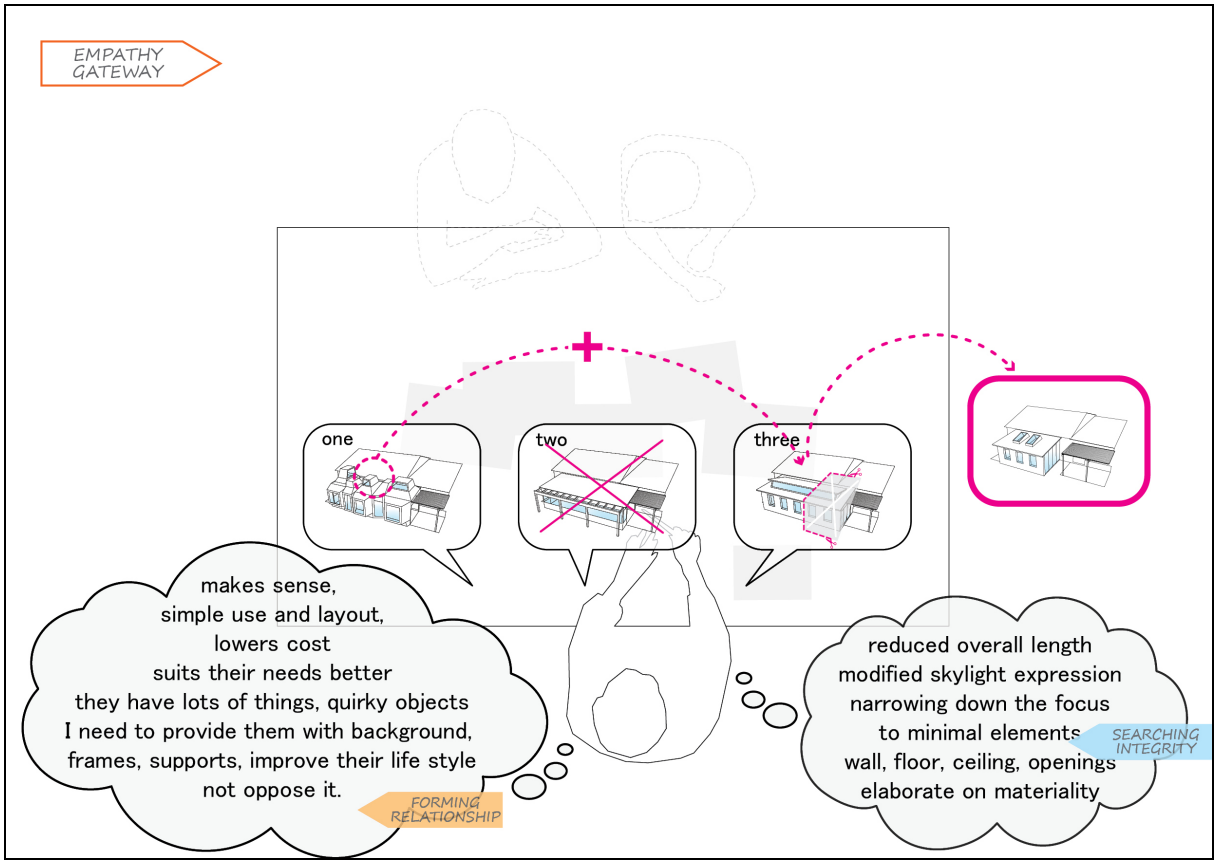

Figure 9. Illustration of entering empathy gateway showing conversations within the architect's thoughts. © Author

I thought that making it simpler would lower the cost as much as possible. However, once I began engaging a builder, it became apparent that the cost was still too high, much to my surprise. I had already made the building much smaller than how it was originally designed, with the cost issue in mind, but it was still not meeting the budget. Through many discussions with the builder, I came to realize that the one element which was adding to the cost was the in-situ concrete wall. Such wall construction is commonly done in my home country of Japan, but in Australia in-situ concrete is very expensive and no one wants to do it. I managed to convince the client of my reasoning for the concrete wall rather than a timber construction

which would have been a much cheaper option. Eventually the client agreed to the in-site concrete and increased their budget, yet I still had a cost problem.

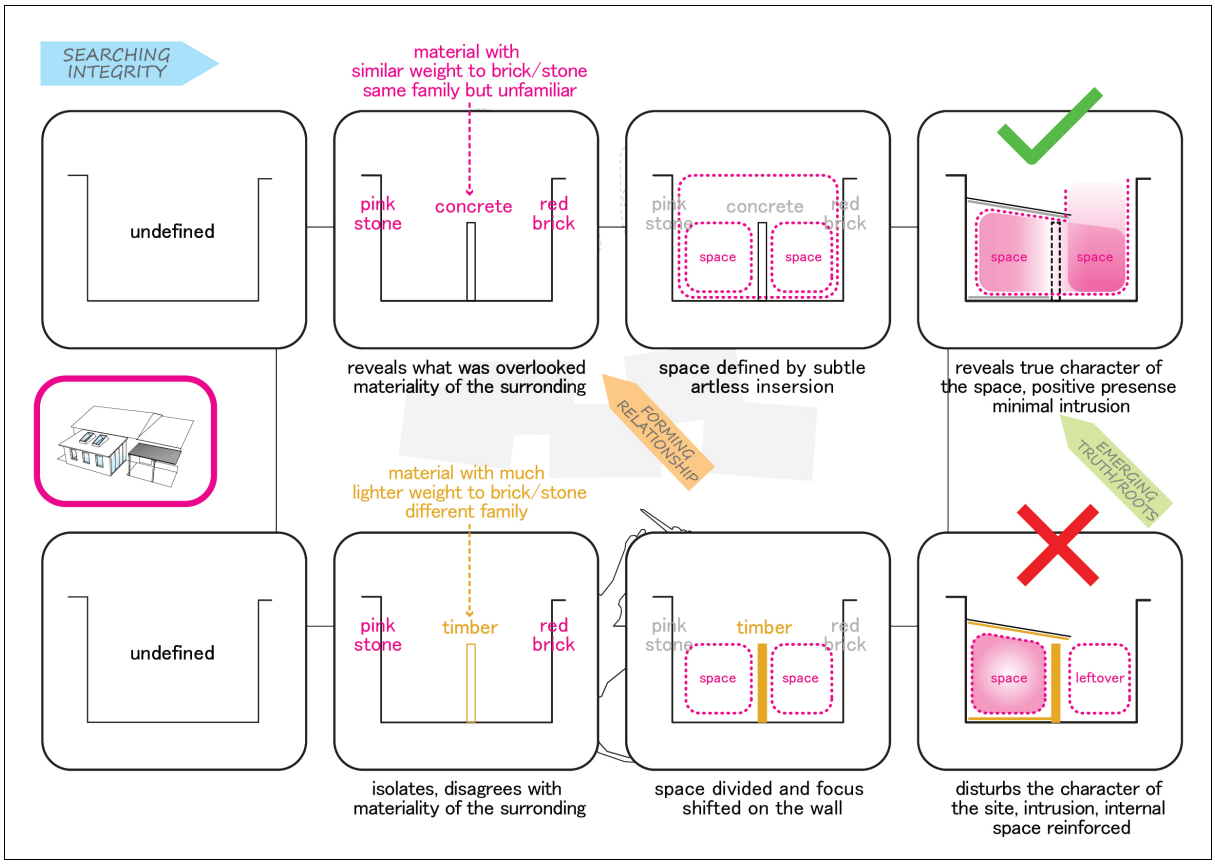

Figure 10. Illustration showing the reasons for the in-situ concrete wall. © Author

From there I had a series of conversations with the builder to understand why and what was raising the cost of this single concrete wall, which was only 4m by 2m. Through several iterations of asking questions and trying many ideas, I began to understand that the rectangular opening I designed was a problem. The thought behind my design was to resonate with the rhythm of existing openings in the existing house. I was looking for a logic in what the alternative could be. I tried many different options, every time seeking a response from the builder. The final design we agreed on was that small circular openings would be more affordable than rectilinear openings. The question was – would they work from a design point of view? My initial thought was “No way. I had no curve in this design at all”. However, I began to question what these windows were really for. They were not for the views, nor for light, nor for ventilation, rather they were the connection to the garden, for framing the red brick fencing wall, and for providing a sense of space behind. I realized then, that circular openings were the ‘right’ solution, a solution with integrity that is open and genuine, free from artificiality, free from any intent to deceive or impress. The final solution was better than what I had originally proposed and worked better for all parties involved.

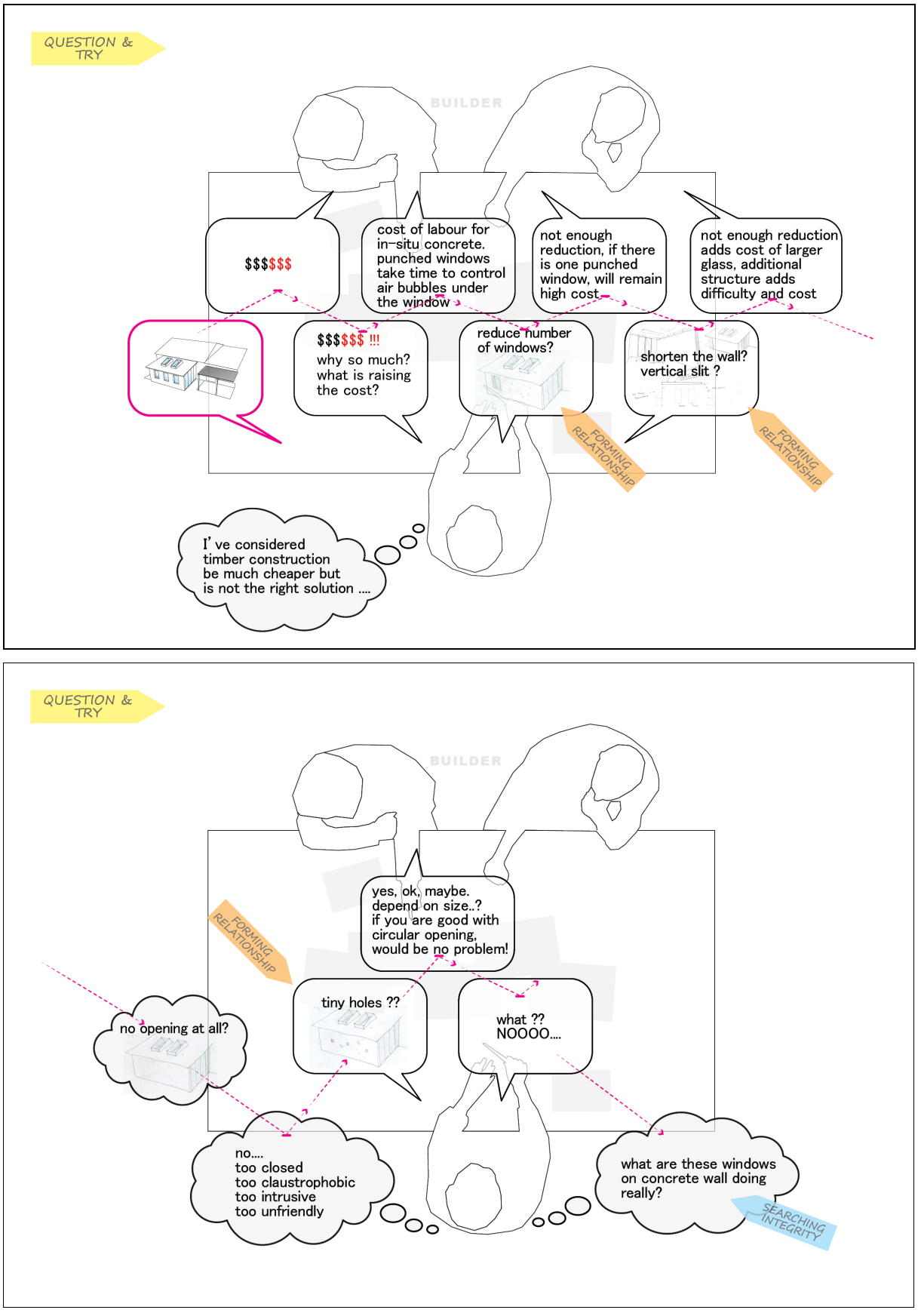

Figure 11. Illustration of the 'question & try' method between the architect and the builder, which is often a series of conversations. © Author

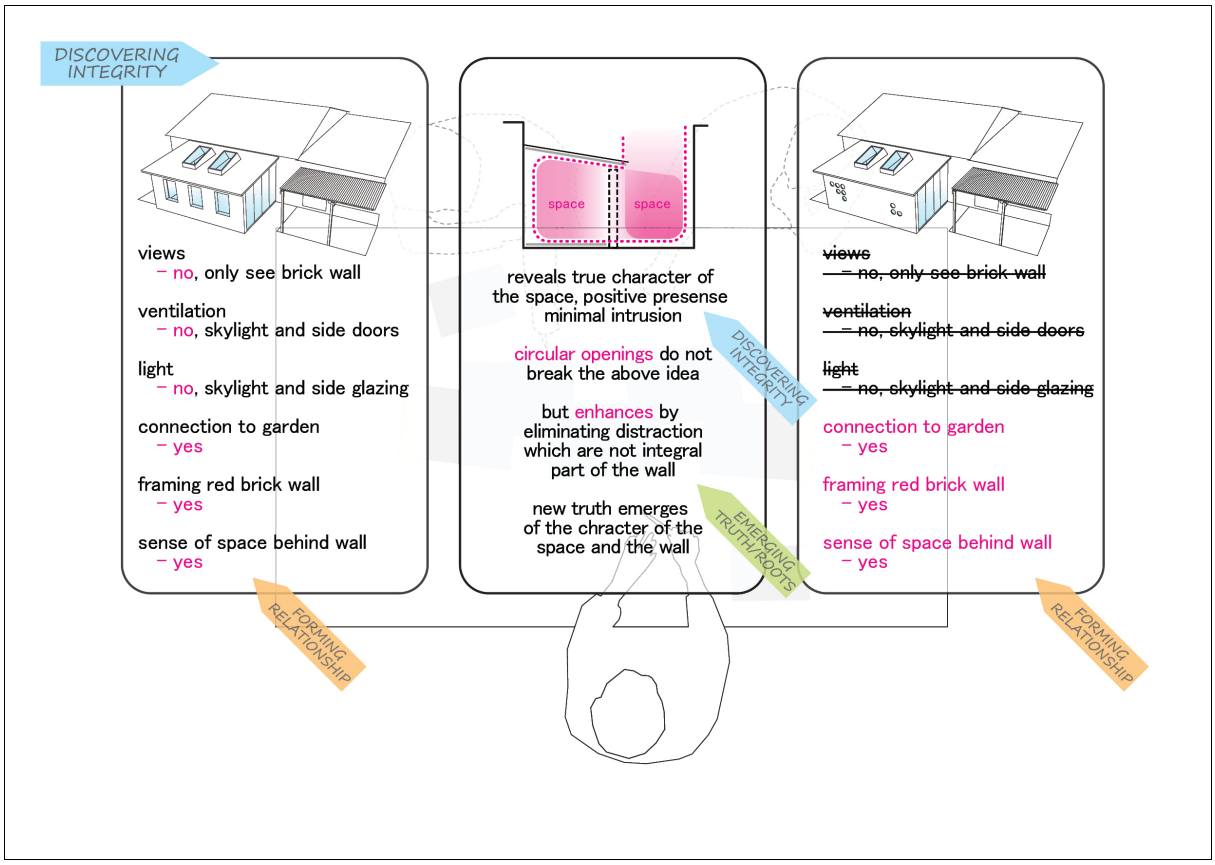

Figure 12. 'Question & try" methods lead to 'forming relationships' and 'discovering integrity' in the solution. © Author

Confident Empathy in Reflection

This process has demonstrated how encountering irresolutions through the lens of empathetic practice can be a productive and essential part of the design process. Furthermore, utilising negotiating methods of 'question & try', while 'forming relationships' and 'discovering integrity', has resulted in spaces that are activated through architecture which is not intrusive, but rather rooted and honest to its location to reveal the true nature of the space or new characters.

'Confident empathy' gives designers the potential to turn unintended occurrences into opportunities. I treasure imperfections. Unexpected things always happen during the process of designing as well as construction. As architects, we need to adapt to various demanding situations where different issues arise, whether it be a budget or program change or a builder's objection. These unknowns produce better outcomes as they provide opportunities to explore and express moments, such as through different materials, details and programs. Architects face unknowns also during the process of developing projects. There are differences between the thoughts of a client, architect, and builder, different materials, programs, budgets, as well as cultural differences. Architects need to see all these as

opportunities. To navigate and find solutions to these issues is critical. It requires one to adapt to various situations and solve issues with integrity and beauty. When one takes these irresolutions as one's strength, the outcome will be stronger. The effort will be seen in the outcome affecting the satisfaction, inspiration and wonder of the occupant, participants and viewers of the project.

My ability to practice 'confident empathy' in the design process is enriched by my life trajectory of working in different cultures and languages, finding myself in cultural gaps, adapting myself to the unknowns, and striving to grow in these situations. I believe the effect has been two-way in not only being on me adapting to each new situation but also on my surroundings adapting to new foreign elements. Moving from one practice to another, again finding myself in the gaps of different approaches, yet adapting to the new situation and its surroundings, have resulted in my ability to accept foreign entities. In life I am always in search of the unknown. The challenge of facing the unexpected happenstances is what drives my curiosity forward. These connections between life and encountering irresolutions are important and significant. They should be treasured and amplified as they are generative moments for architectural expression as well as for those occupying the space. As Jon Kolko describes of his empathetic design process, "It's a process informed by deep qualitative data rather than statistical market data. It celebrates people rather than technology. And it requires identifying and believing in behavioral insights, which are subjective and, in their ambiguity, full of risk."[14]

Confident empathy is not perfect and can fail in situations where other participants have no interest in empathy. When I participated in a project where all empathy doors were closed from all angles, I was not able to function to my full potential. I was denied the opportunity to turn problems into anything useful. This reinforced my understanding and importance of having the right team for the project for the best outcome possible. Confident empathy works best when all parties have their empathy doors wide open. No matter complicated the project or situation is, when people are willing to engage in discussions to find a solution, the result will prevail. Outcome is the embodiment of the process, full of human emotions, connections, dialogues, failures, challenges and joy.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to advocate for the versatility and strength of confident empathy in working through irresolution in the design process, and contributes to the discussions around negotiating methods and mechanisms as part of collaborative project development and its outcomes.

Unlike what is now commonly understood as the empathic practice, which relies on methods such as group workshops to gather large amounts of information/data to be analysed in order to create a design that suits the users, 'confident empathy' brings design practice back closer to the origins of the word as first introduced by Vischer in highlighting the importance of imagination by the architect. Although Vischer's empathy was primarily discussed as a relationship between an object and the person, at the same time it can be regarded as person to person. This idea is supported by Kahn who believed in a person's undeniable enthusiasm to encourage others to believe something to be true. Till's view of architecture also allows for participation and asks for architects to adapt and accept inputs from multiple sources although there is an element in his view that aligns with the more popular understanding of empathic practice. Confident empathy in a sense is messier than Till's understanding of the negotiation process as there remain individual identities transferring upon one another. It is not a neat formula or a system, but rather a fluid form of negotiations which puts the trust in the imaginations of the participants. Eric Owen Moss expressed these complex relationships in his architecture with geometries often appearing dismantled or overlapping each other while being put together. Moss emphasized these moments instead of smoothing them out or hiding them. Mockbee's approach to architecture which shaped the practice of Rural Studio seems most in line with the idea of confident empathy as it appears to be the embodiment of true collaboration. Students participating in Rural Studio have heartful negotiations with their clients and teammates which sometimes involve arguments but allow them to learn to work through the issues together. Mockbee spoke of his students, "Through their own efforts and imagination, students create something wonderful – architecturally, socially, politically, environmentally, esthetically."[15] Similarly, Vischer describes the aesthetics of form, "A poetic effort in the best sense occurs when it is combined with reconciliation on the level of higher emotion or when the forms have been touched by the consecration of loving kindness and human sentiment."[16]

Embracing many unintended occurrences throughout the design process invites surprising and joyful relationships with outcomes which are created with an ensemble of imperfections. As a result of this design process, the architecture can be seen to enrich the use and perspectives of participants beyond the completion of the building as it has been enriched by them. With 'confident empathy', when used to its full potential, everyone in the team no matter their hierarchical status, or whether she or he is the client, builder or consultant, plays an integral part in the process where the outcome is embraced and appreciated by all. This approach gives power and confidence to the individuals within the team, no matter how large or small his or her contribution may be. 'Confident empathy', therefore, is essential for great architectural outcomes that are rooted and honest to the location and the people involved.

Figure 13. Artist studio in Adelaide, 2016. Architectural outcome of confident empathy in practice. © Author

Figure 14. Tombstone project in Japan, 2015. Architectural outcome of confident empathy in practice. © Author

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