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to

'Alison and Peter Smithson: Ideas, Architecture and Impact' symposium

convened by

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at

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Abstract

The illustrated paper 'Very Like Minds' explores the creative practice and research process for the production of the installation 'A Nodding Acquaintance'. This new work by artist Sophie Warren and architect Jonathan Mosley was commissioned by Edge Arts for 'Parallel (of Life and) Architecture' group exhibition with Assemble & Simon Terrill and The Decorators & Goig in response to the work of Alison and Peter Smithson. The exhibition took place at Edge Arts, Bath University, Bath, UK from 22nd September to 4th November 2017.

The paper briefly surveys the thinking of architects Alison and Peter Smithson with regard to human association and social relations embodied within their writings and housing designs, and how this formed a starting point for the installation, developed through models, diagrams and drawings. The gallery work is described and illustrated referencing its intent in terms of social choreography and engendering human relations and its response to current social and political contexts.

Very Like Minds

Jonathan Mosley [UWE / Sophie Warren + Jonathan Mosley warrenandmosley.com]
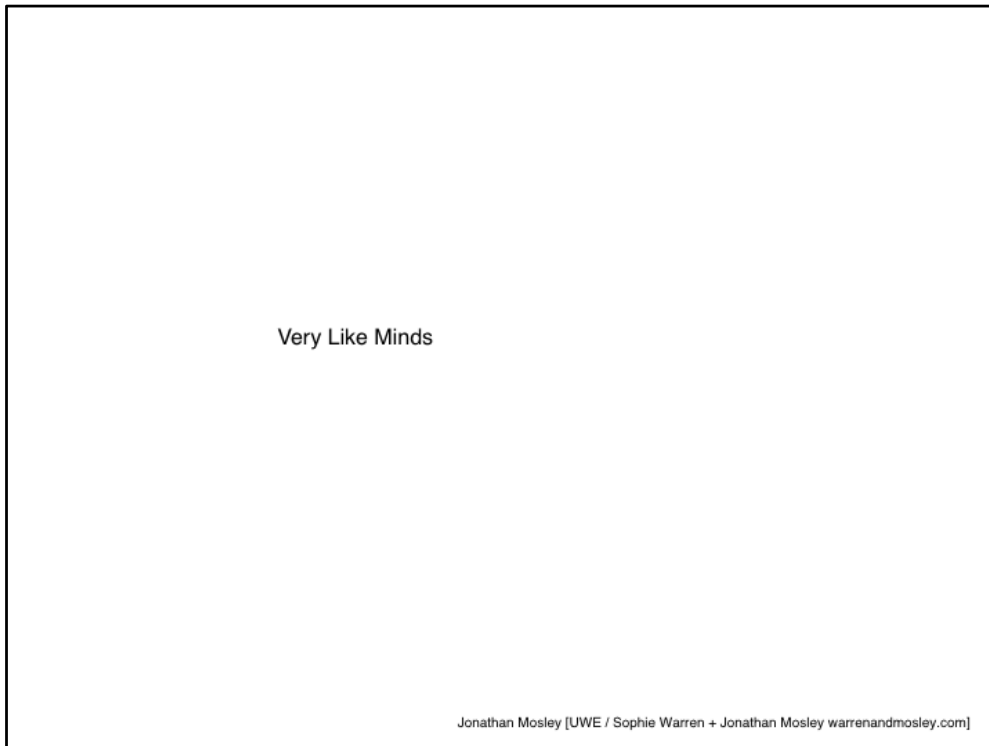
Thank you to the Edge, Bath University and Feilden Clegg Bradley architects for the invitation to talk to you today. I am speaking on behalf of my collaborator Sophie Warren and I.

Working on a new commission for the Edge in response to the Smithsons has been a fascinating journey for us. Edge Arts' director, Jamie Eastman, in support of our research practice, was keen that the commission should provide an opportunity for us to develop a work that aligned with our interests; (I think he used the words) 'that made sense for us'. We knew a little of the Smithsons' work and after some research and fulfilling the commission, know a little bit more.
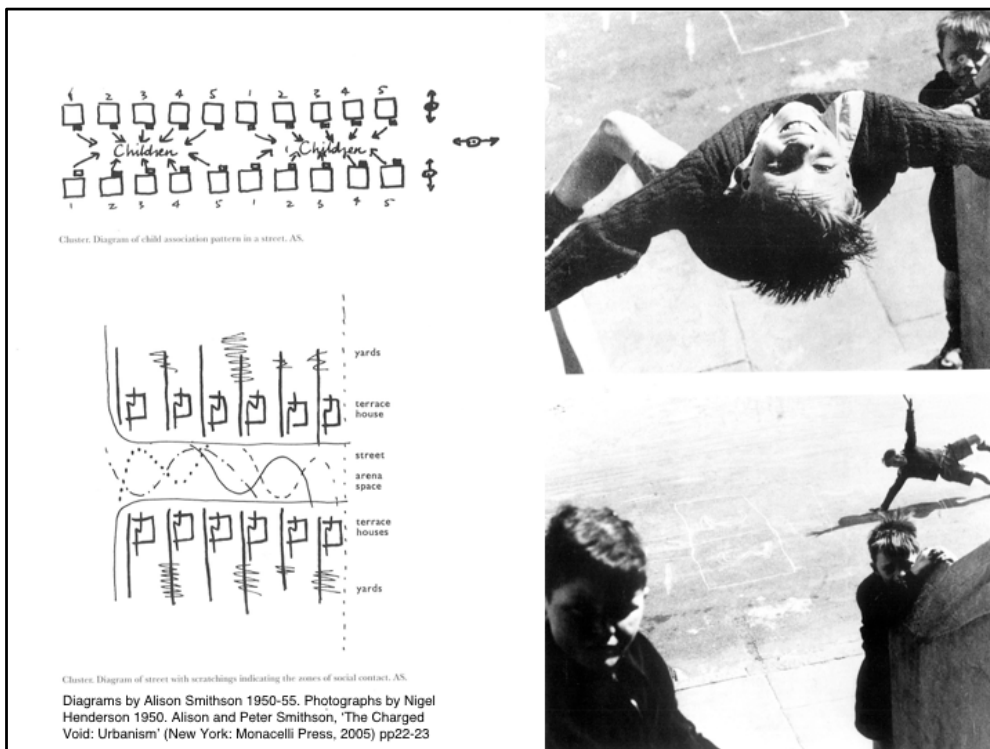
Our aim was to find where our thinking and that of the Smithsons intersected in a productive way. I am going to talk about the intersection we found. I called the talk 'Very Like Minds'. This is one form of association between people among many that the Smithsons referenced in their work. Their ambition was the 'invention of an architecture that is structured by notions of association'(Smithson, 1970: 11). Their ambition took form after WW2 and in part, was in response to the atrocities that took place. The Smithsons stated that post war the 'confluence of philosophy and architecture attempted to define simultaneously the meaning of existence and the 'being' of architecture.' So they proposed the idea of living and dwelling move away from a technocratic vision of the world and architecture as 'form that follows function' - an architecture unto itself - to a more socially-rooted kind of architecture

which addressed place, the individual and the collective. The Smithsons considered Le Corbusier's four functions of architecture declared in the Athens Charter at CIAM in 1933 as inadequate for the building of communities, instead promoting in the Doorn Manifesto of 1954 that 'to comprehend the pattern of human associations we must consider every community in its particular place.' (Smithson, 1970). And specific forms of habitat should be generated for specific social and physical contexts.

'Any coming together is cluster… a new system of relationships'

Alison and Peter Smithson (1956) 'The Charged Void: Urbanism' (New York: Monacelli Press, 2005) p30

The Smithsons generated the concept of 'cluster' to replace the group entities of streets, towns and cities which they understood as too loaded with historical overtones and too homogenously applied and entrenched as patterns of built environment. 'Cluster' became entwined with their project of Urban Re-identification to create new architectural types and find new approaches to urbanism.

Cluster. Diagram of child association pattern in a street. AS.

yards
terrace house
street
arena space
terrace houses
yards

Cluster. Diagram of street with scratchings indicating the zones of social contact. AS.

Diagrams by Alison Smithson 1950-55. Photographs by Nigel Henderson 1950. Alison and Peter Smithson, 'The Charged Void: Urbanism' (New York: Monacelli Press, 2005) pp22-23
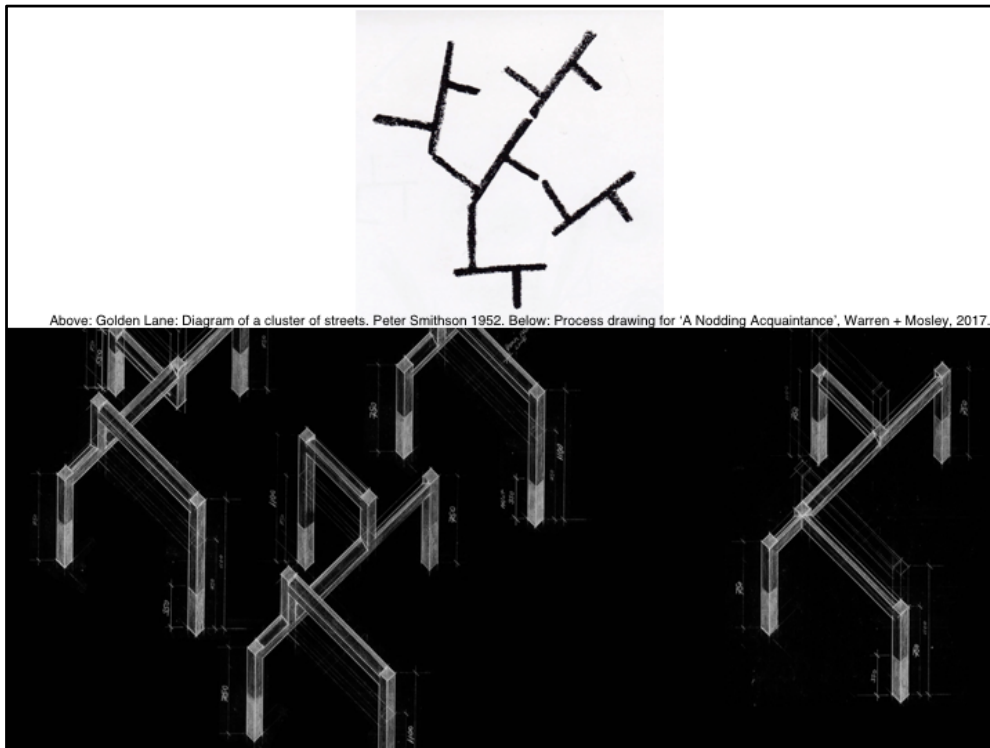
This did not mean that they were not fascinated in the social dynamics of streets. They wrote that 'The street is an arena for social expression' (Smithson, 1970:24). They just believed that the forms of expression were rapidly changing and therefore new thinking was needed on the form of the street.

They studied patterns of use in streets in the East End of London, photographed in 1950 by the artist Nigel Henderson, looking at interaction and use, both along the length of the street and in the back yards.

Left: Detail of 'A Nodding Acquaintance", Warren + Mosley, 2017. Right: Peace Tea, Fulham, London, 1919. Above: Cluster: Diagram of involuntary/voluntary association by Alison Smithson 1951
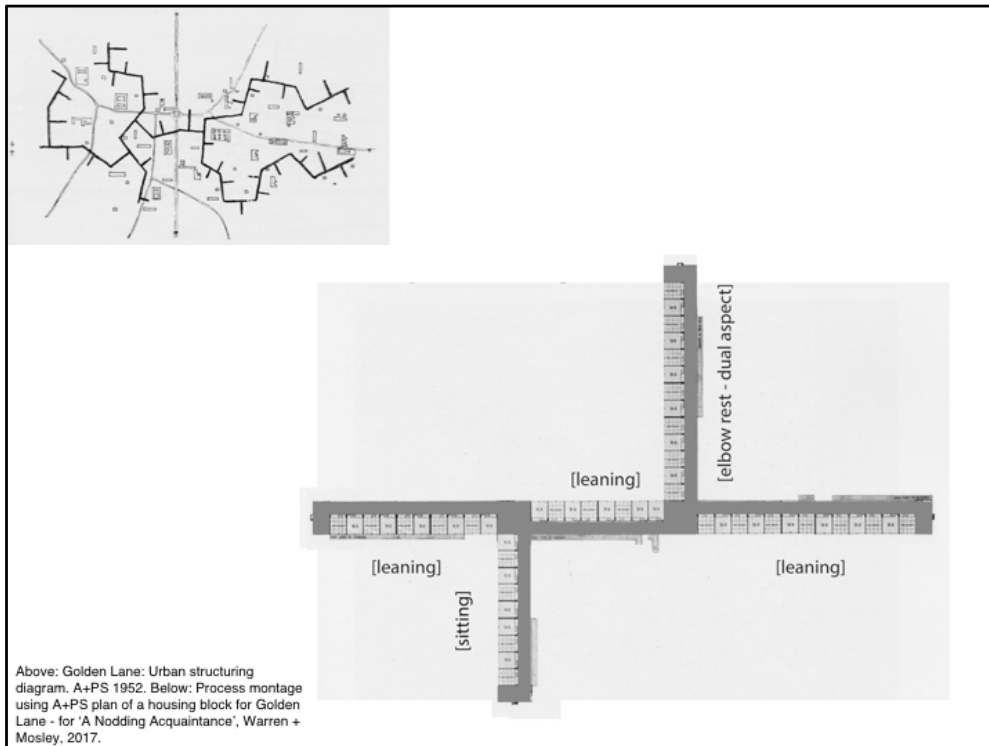
They developed a diagram of social involuntary and voluntary association within different scales of settlement (see the top image). As an example and in explanation - taking the street scale, you might <u>voluntarily</u> have one person in which you confide along a street where you live, but <u>involuntarily</u> may have others people in the street to whom you feel obliged to nod.

In thinking about this diagram Sophie and I started to feel a temporal distance from the Smithsons. In their diagram they suggest that nationality was a principal involuntary association between inhabitants of the city, something that is no longer the case, as successful world cities have become vibrant centres of migration. During the time we were developing our new work, concepts of nationality, sovereignty and the Union Jack and St George's cross flags were being used politically in opposition to migration and, between the lines, to multi-culturalism. We felt this demanded a response. And so, acknowledging the Smithson's fascination in streets and the distance in time to post-war Britain we decided to bring elements of a street party into the gallery. But the bunting we partially dismantled and the flags we obliterated to question our current national self-identity.

Above: Golden Lane: Diagram of a cluster of streets. Peter Smithson 1952. Below: Process drawing for 'A Nodding Acquaintance', Warren + Mosley, 2017.

Peter Smithson's sketch for the Golden Lane estate design proposal became another starting point. The Smithsons wrote that 'the principle aid to social cohesion is looseness of grouping and ease of communication.' (Smithson, 1970). As an architectural embodiment of this, the shapes in the sketch that were intended as eleven storey blocks of housing had a looseness of grouping that we found interesting. We imagined the plan view of these forms being projected and built not as blocks of housing but as frameworks for the body. Could this maintain a looseness of grouping and create ease in communication?

Above: Golden Lane: Urban structuring diagram. A+PS 1952. Below: Process montage using A+PS plan of a housing block for Golden Lane - for 'A Nodding Acquaintance', Warren + Mosley, 2017.

The monumental scale of the Smithson's proposal for Golden Lane, never built, created 'streets in the air' on every third level. The architects brought the back yard in proximity to the street deck, folding together the front to back Victorian terrace to maximise the views and the social interaction between public and private areas. At our very different scale, we used the study of proxemics that sets out parameters of intimate space, personal space, social space and public space, to inform the evolution of our framework for the body, echoing concerns of prospect and aspect of the housing block.

Detail, 'A Nodding Acquaintance', Warren + Mosley, 2017. Photo: Pete Brandt
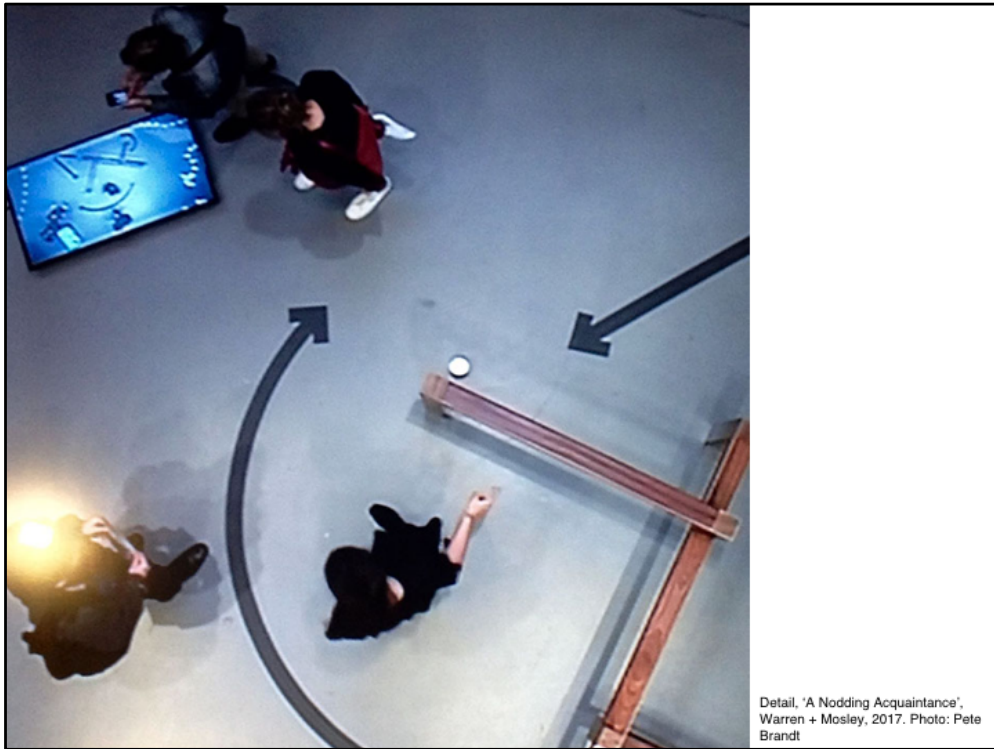
The Smithsons' ambition to invent an architecture that is structured by notions of association intersects with an ongoing concern for social choreography within our practice. Through multiple projects, we have been exploring the interconnectedness of materialities of architectural space, objects and bodies. We create architectural settings and experimental, time-based and spatial interactions to reflect on social orders.

The work we produced for the commission for the Edge is titled 'A Nodding Acquaintance'. It proposes the idea of a temporary choreographic community of bodies, objects and elements involving the visitor in a series of small encounters within the setting that constitutes the work. By encounters, I mean to include those between a person and other people or with objects or with architecture.

Detail, 'A Nodding Acquaintance', Warren + Mosley, 2017. Photo: Warren + Mosley

A monitor shows the 'plan view' of the setting, referencing a predominant view of the architect but bringing this into the field of action so that the plan (unusually for its type) includes the occupation of space and the viewer.

Detail, 'A Nodding Acquaintance', Warren + Mosley, 2017. Photo: Warren + Mosley

The structure's top surfaces are inclined to provide comfort for sitting or leaning and suggest orientation of the body and a variety of configurations for people to gather. They reference the Smithson's designs for Golden Lane housing blocks with their switching of orientation of street and residential units.

Detail, 'A Nodding Acquaintance', Warren + Mosley, 2017. Photo: Charlotte Crewe

The timber structure is for talking or idling whilst sitting, leaning or standing. It has been engineered to support the body in everyday social gestures and postures. Its highest point is elbow height, its lowest point is knee-height. We wanted the timber and the design to suggest the identity of a piece of furniture, between something public, like an urban bench, and a chair brought out of the house into the street for a street party.

Detail, 'A Nodding Acquaintance', Warren + Mosley, 2017. Photo: Peter Blakemore

Within the setting and outside in the foyer of Edge Arts gallery, the graphic arrows imply notional movement of architecture, bodies and objects.

We would like to think that the work nods to the Smithsons across the distance of time. In our contemporary hyper-networked world, the Smithsons' thinking on new forms of architecture generated by social relations seems an increasingly natural step. And their ambition for the 'invention of an architecture that is structured by notions of association' remains highly relevant and something to which to strive.

I have always found the conceptual and yet visceral imagination of Italo Calvino to provide inspiration for thinking about architecture and urbanism and how we live together within their environments. One of the cities, titled 'Ersilia' within his book 'Invisible Cities' creates architectural form from the human relationships evolved within its streets and buildings, and so has direct relevance. In closing, I will read it out. [Calvino, 1997:76]

'In Ersilia, to establish the relationships that sustain the city's life, the inhabitants stretch strings from the corners of the houses, white or black or grey or black-and-white according to whether they mark a relationship of blood, of trade, authority, agency. When the strings become so numerous that you can no longer pass among them, the inhabitants leave: the houses are dismantled; only the strings and their supports remain.

From a mountainside, camping with their household goods, Ersilia's refugees look at the labyrinth of taut strings and poles that rise in the plain. That is the city of Ersilia still, and they are nothing.

They rebuild Ersilia elsewhere. They weave a similar pattern of strings which they would like to be more complex and at the same time more regular than the other. Then they abandon it and take themselves and their houses still farther away.

Thus, when traveling in the territory of Ersilia, you come upon the ruins of the abandoned cities, without the walls which do not last, without the bones of the dead which the wind rolls away: spider webs of intricate relationships seeking a form.'

Smithson, A. & Smithson, P. 'The Charged Void: Urbanism' (New York: Monacelli Press, 2001)
Smithson, A. & Smithson, P. 'Ordinariness and Light' (London: Faber & Faber, 1970)
Calvino, I. (trans William Weaver) 'Invisible Cities' (London: Vintage Books, 1997)