



Building Change
SABE Architects in Residence
SUMMACUMFEMMER
Workshop 24-28 March 2025
TU Dublin

Figurative Necessities

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For a long time, the distance between design and construction seemed easily bridgeable. An idea conceived in the architect's mind would travel via the drawing to the building site, where skilled hands would translate it into built reality. Here: intellectual conception. There: physical execution. In between: the drawing. A rather one-directional process. This system works – and continues to work – particularly well when we build anew, with materials we are free to specify in seemingly endless quantities, on sites we can easily control from the safe remove of the studio.

Things become altogether more complicated, however, when we turn to adaptation and reuse. Suddenly, the distance between office and building feels untraversable. We don't know what to draw until we understand the existing structure – and we won't understand the existing structure until we begin to build. And more challenging still: how are we to design something in a drawing if we intend to work with reused materials whose dimensions and qualities we do not yet fully know? Perhaps one might say: the prescriptive drawing from the office is dead. We must design, draw and build at the same time. Back and forth.

This simultaneity formed the premise for a week-long workshop with first-year architecture students – part of the "Building Change" programme at the School of Architecture, Building and Environment (SABE) in Dublin. Unfortunately, transforming entire houses at full scale in just five days was rather impractical. We needed a stand-in: something with presence and materiality, a structure that already existed and bore traces of its own history. We settled on cupboards – wooden cabinets of various ages, sourced from across Dublin. They were treated as "existing houses" and confronted with the indisputable necessities of our time: the necessity to insulate them against heat and cold, protect them from flooding, shield them from the burning sun, extend them, condense them.

Cabinets seemed apt because they occupy a curious in-between scale – somewhere between model and building. Their materiality makes them more architectural than a cardboard model, while their size allows for full-scale testing of structural and constructive ideas. Architecture, of course, has always had a thing for cabinet-houses. Think of the fin-de-siècle wardrobe, with its cornices and balustrades, or the Architettura Cabinets of Fornasetti and Gio Ponti – furniture masquerading as buildings. These, however, were conceived as new constructions. We were more interested in how cabinet-architecture might emerge through reuse – as adaptation.

For five days, the amazing first floor of the former Chocolate Factory in Dublin became a wood workshop for 75 students. We had brought much of our own tools – both electric and manual – by van and ferry from Germany. The TU had provided additional tools, purchased both for this and future events. In the workshop, students radically transformed their cabinets, each working with a reference from architectural history – a precedent that offered spatial ideas, compositional strategies, or programmatic provocations. A raised hut by Lina Bo Bardi. A water-collecting roof by Manthey Kula. A poetic extension by Alison and Peter Smithson. Figurative responses to practical necessities. No new materials were introduced, and as little as possible was thrown away. Everything was altered, reshaped, repurposed. Cut, bent, stretched, reassembled. With saws, chisels and clamps – but hardly any drawings. By the end, doors opened in unexpected directions, offcuts became structural, sawdust was repurposed as insulation. Constraint had become a condition of creativity – and, to everyone's surprise, a source of delight.

Eight groups worked on eight "building changes", each comprising 8 to 10 students. This group size was just small enough to remain manageable, but certainly at the upper limit. For many, the process felt unfamiliar at first. The task needed to be discovered, as did a collective working method. We – together with the first-year studio teachers – encouraged the students to begin directly with their hands, not with conversation. There were to be no preliminary sketches. Ideas were to be scored directly onto the object. The chisel, the saw and the router replaced the pen. Each day, students grew more confident in this new mode of thinking-through-making. By the end of the week, the process had become more fluent, more joyful – and much more productive. Students not only developed technical skills and spatial clarity, but also discovered their project's architectural intent through the process of transformation itself.

The historical precedents played a quiet but crucial role in all this. We had selected eight reference projects in advance, each addressing a contemporary issue in a distinct and spatially articulate way: A House in Szumin by Zofia and Oskar Hansen (The Seasonal House), A Transformation in Alicante by Flores y Prats (The Condensed House), An Experimental House by Gernot Minke (The Insulated House), A Studio House by Lina Bo Bardi (The Raised House), A Shrine in Ise (The Demountable House), A Ferry Terminal by Manthey Kula (The Water-Collecting House), A House Extension in Herrenberg by Alison and Peter Smithson (The Expanded House), A House Imagined by Filip Dujardin (The Heightened House).

On the first day, students pinned photographs of these precedents to the columns of the Chocolate Factory, directly beside their cabinets. Some began with quite

immediate, form-giving gestures. In the case of the ferry terminal, the cabinet was cut with the circular saw in two with V-shaped incisions. The once-vertical doors now formed a wide, horizontal roof, just like in the reference. By the end of the first day, a spatial figure had been found – so coherent that the rest of the week could be spent in refinement.

At times, out of overzealousness or haste, the cabinets were almost entirely dismantled into their individual components – sometimes using fairly forceful methods, reminiscent of a full-scale demolition on a building site. In these moments, we not only urged a more material-conscious approach to disassembly (as we must on construction sites too), but also explained the importance of preservation for the act of design: at every point, it is helpful to have the image of the whole building in front of you, and to move forward step by step. Each intervention becomes the basis for the next – reshaping and reconfiguring, rather than wiping the slate clean.

Over time, each project developed its own identity – one that inevitably began to distance itself from the precedents. A particularly striking moment occurred, for instance, with the Lina Bo Bardi cabinet, when it came to the height of the legs: suddenly, there wasn't enough material to make the outer supports as thick and long as the inner ones. So they became slimmer and were fitted with small extension feet made from even tinier offcuts to span the necessary distance. A lack of material became the very driver of a joyful act of making.

Perhaps herein lies one of the most valuable lessons: that the constraints of our time – from material scarcity to ecological imperatives to the unpredictability of adapting existing structures – need not be burdens, but can be an inexhaustible source of inspiration. But for this to happen, we must be allowed to stay close to things – both in our professional work and in academic training. Again and again, we must be permitted to leave the studio behind, to step out of the distant world of 'thinking' and into the realm of hands-on 'doing'. This does not turn us as architects into craftsmen. Nor should we presume that this makes craftsmanship redundant. But the changing world around us does create space to shift our profession – if only slightly. Towards a more open-ended practice (though no less strategic) than the one we know from sketching on a blank page. Towards a more polyphonic practice (though no less individual) than what became standard in the era of new-build. And towards a humbler practice (though no less rich) than we are used to in a world of plenty.

Cabinets turned architecture may not offer answers to all of the discipline's questions – certainly not within the span of five days. But they might just awaken the joy of engaging, hands-on, with both long-standing and emerging themes of our field. At least we like to think so.

Projects

Building Change 1 The seasonal house

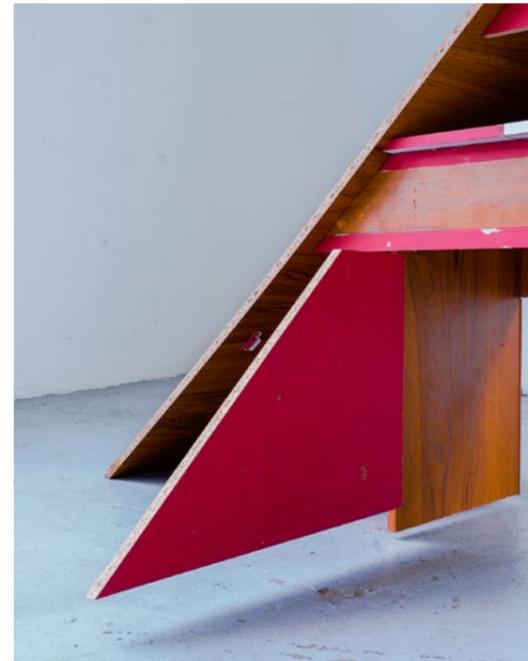
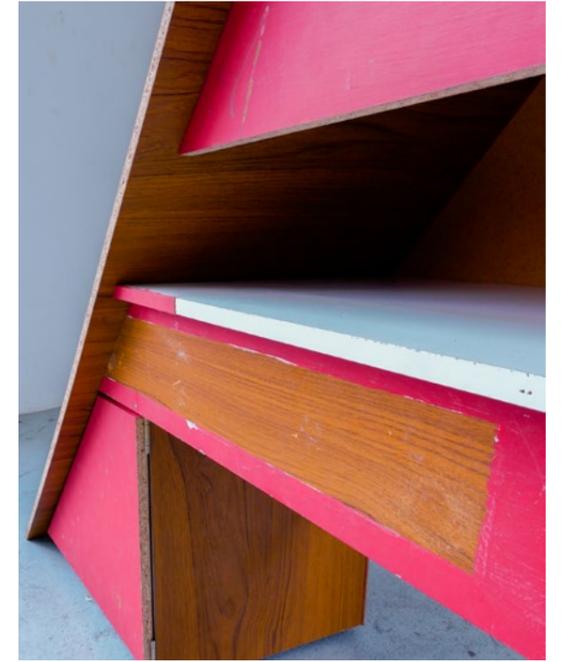
cabinet before conversion



Precedent: Zofia and Oskar Hansen, House in Szumin, 1968-2005



The formerly closed volume of the cabinet opens into an open figure. Beneath the large sloping roof, sheltered but uninsulated spaces emerge – used in different ways as the seasons shift. Students: Teodoras Anusauskas, Lena Abdulrahem, Alex M. Burgess, Erylle C. Carandang, Evan Darby, Domantas Svazas, Annabel Fleming, Cait Eyre, Lily Hassett, Catalina Gorbatiuc



Building Change 2 The condensed house

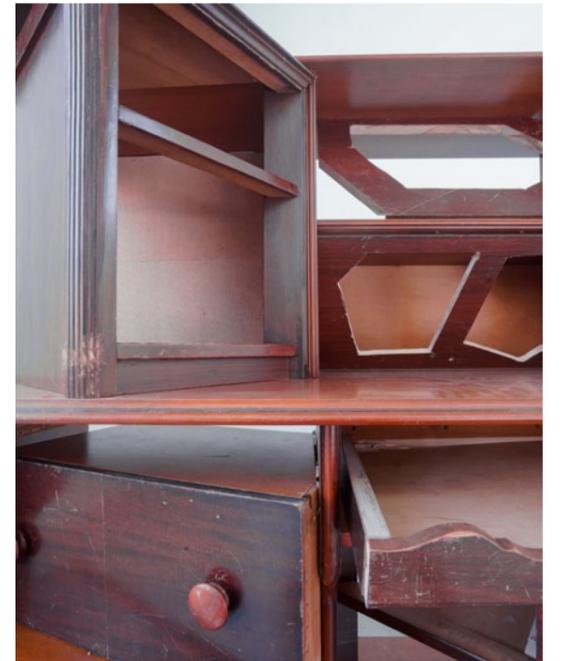
cabinets before conversion



Precedent: Flores y Prats, Casal Balaguer, Palma de Mallorca, 2016



Two cabinets merge into one: a juxtaposition of two similar, yet fundamentally different architectures – not as a contrast, but as a fusion. Students: Gradi Nsimba, Clarenz B. Pechoche, Madalina Melnic, Evan-Patrick Milici, Lea Moloney, Andrea Turcan, Jasmine Singh, Jacob O'Brien, Hubert Wolanin



Building Change 3 The insulated house

cabinet before conversion



Precedent: Gernot Minke, Seminar room, University Kassel, 2020



From a cabinet with thin walls to a house with thick walls: solid timber panels act as formwork for a soft insulation – made from the sawdust collected throughout the week. Students: Raihanah Al Sudani, Aseel Hassan, Rachel Kavanagh, Alannah Masterson, Ben J. Mc Govern, Valentin Mocanu, Zizi Okoli, Natalia Rittau, Bronagh J. Smyth



Building Change 4 The raised house

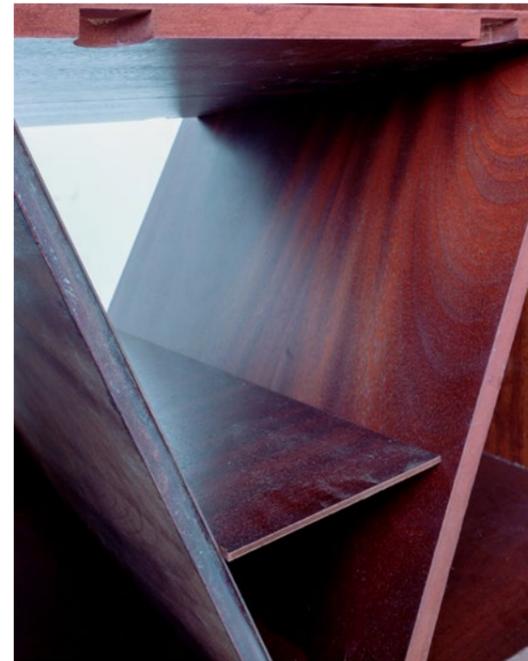
cabinets before conversion



Precedent: Lina Bo Bardi, Office/Studio, Sao Paulo, 1986



Out of two separate cabinet elements emerges one house: raised on long legs, allowing the landscape to pass through below. Students: Iana Agarkova, Jenny Bejdo, Danny Brady, Owen Gorman, Amadeusz Kasprzak, Mia Mc Kiernan, Ellie O'Mahony, Jennifer Tataru, Ruth Woods



Building Change 5 The demountable house

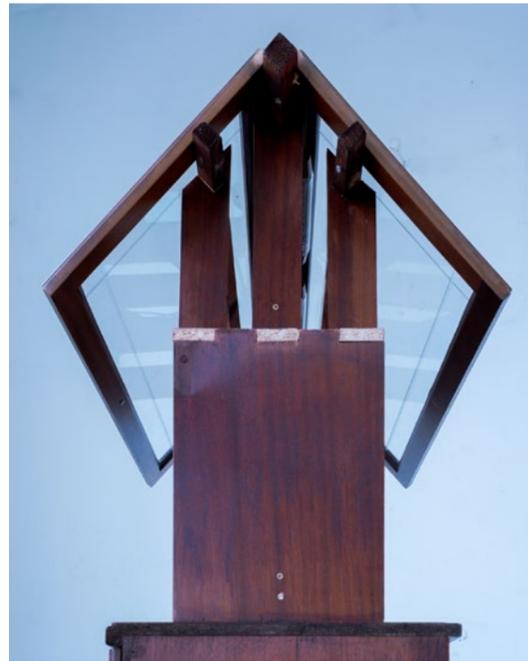
cabinet before conversion



Precedent: Ise Shrine, Mie Prefecture, Japan



A cabinet, once symmetrical across its transverse axis, becomes a demountable shrine, now aligned along its longitudinal axis. Students: Caoimhe Menezes, Tighe Mathew, Toby Armstrong, Felicia Delgado, Noah Heslin, Nikola Janosz, David Kinahan, Varvara Kostomarova, Katelyn S. Misquita



Building Change 6 The water collecting house

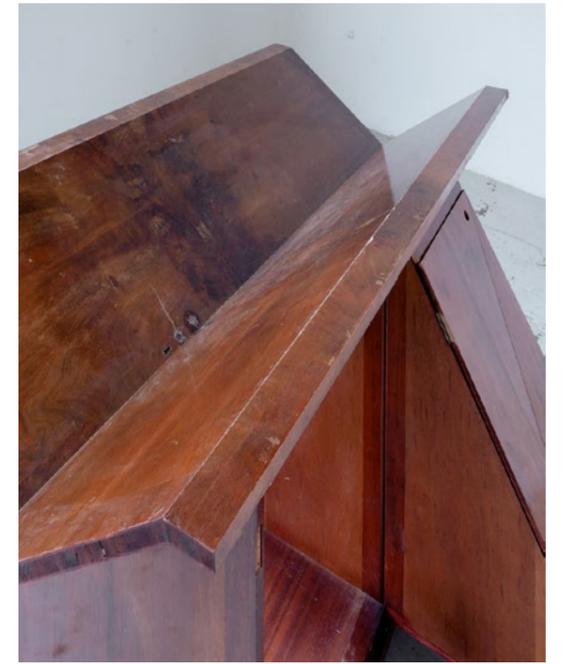
cabinet before conversion



Precedent: Manthey Kula, ferry terminal, Forvik, Norway



A tall, upright wardrobe becomes a house with a large, horizontal roof – for collecting water, or books. Students: Joseph O Brien, Mya O Hara, Sophie M. Ngai, Emma Rochford, Edward Bell, Donncha Byrne, Olivia Hanley, Alannah Cahill, Rhea Mc Guirk



Building Change 7 The expanded house

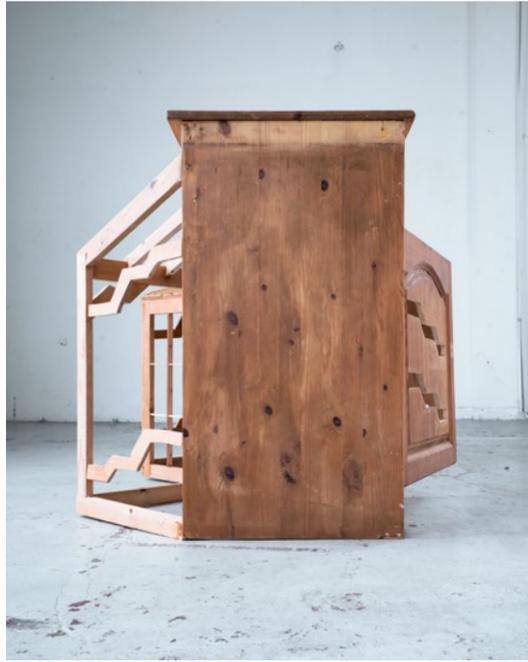
cabinet before conversion



Precedent: Alison and Peter Smithson, Hexenhaus, Bad Karlshafen, Germany, 1983-2002



A small cabinet extends outward, pushing into the landscape. Moments ago still enclosed and planar - now open and full of vibration. Students: Nina Elvinsson, Ninoshka Amanda Fernandes, Saibh Gough, Andrea Gonzalez, Daniel C. Hayes, Emma Hughes, Jwana Kassab, Iollan Farrell, Alex Labachov



Building Change 8 The heightened house

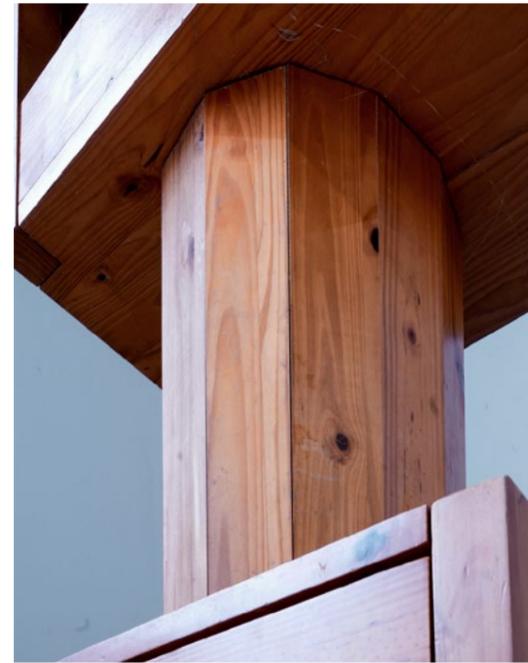
cabinet before conversion

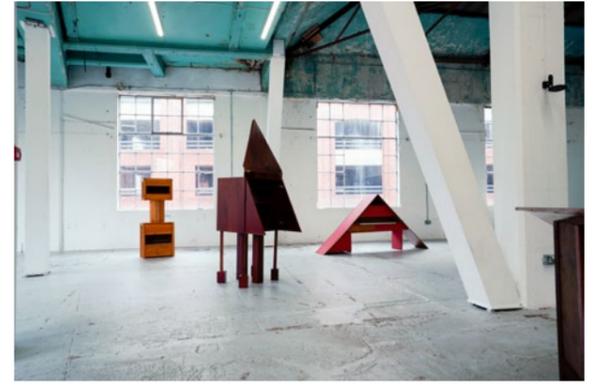


Precedent: Filip Dujardin, Built / Build, 2022



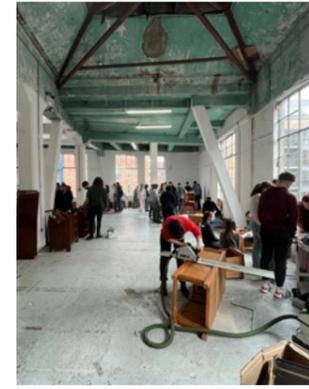
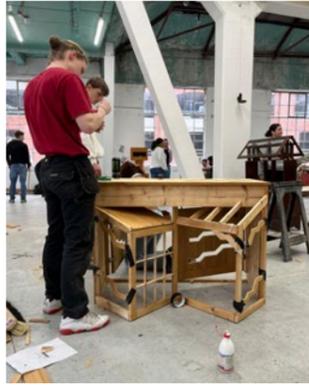
Two parts become three: base, column, and top. Proportions make all the difference. Students: Maia Ludden, Abigael Martin, David Olayiwola, Sam O Dwyer, Ava O Neill, Kenneth Ruxton, Patrick Roddy, Kinga Syroka





Progress

Progress



Acknowledgments

We would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to the School of Architecture, Building and Environment at TU Dublin for inviting us as “Architects in Residence 2025.” In particular, we are grateful to David Leech and Miriam Delaney for their initiative and the outstanding organisation of the workshop week, as well as to the studio leaders Cillian Briody, Gavin Buggy, Mandy Channon, Paul Kelly and Jamie Whelan for their invaluable support in the workshop. Our sincere thanks also go to Emma Geoghegan, Head of Architecture at SABE, for her trust and support. We are especially grateful to Julie Mc Loughlin for so generously making the first floor of the Chocolate Factory available to us and the students for the entire week.

And last but most importantly, we thank all the students for their full commitment throughout the workshop.