

Tony Fretton: Everything I Saw Became Important

Saturday 8 & Sunday 9 November

Design is a very compact activity where you're not sure about what it will do. You work by instinct, and that instinct either unfolds to be something good over time, or it doesn't. While you know that some things will have an immediate effect, the long-term and cultural effects are things you cannot foresee.

— Tony Fretton

Drawing Matter is pleased to present an exhibition of early projects by the London-based architect Tony Fretton. At the centre of the exhibition are four projects, represented by drawings, models, sketchbooks, and photographs from the Drawing Matter Collection: Mute Records (1986, unbuilt), Lisson Gallery I (1986), Lisson Gallery II (1992), and a competition entry for the Holy Island Buddhist Retreat (1993).

Alongside these, the exhibition includes photographs of the architect's early performance works with Station House Opera, of which he was a member in the early 1980s, and Get Ready (1981), a series of images documenting Fretton's morning routine, influenced by the work of American photographers and performance artists. For the first time in over forty years, when it was shown to a small group of students at the Architectural Association, Get Ready is presented with its original audio track.

The exhibition's title, 'Everything I Saw Became Important', is taken from one of the more than forty sketchbooks used by Fretton while designing the Lisson Gallery between 1982 and 1991. The sketchbooks offer an insight into an important part of the architect's working process and the development of his positions on design. They are characterised by their dialogue between drawing and annotation, which

has made them a valuable teaching tool for Drawing Matter in our work with architecture students and practices.

To extend this dialogue between drawing and writing, we have reproduced texts by Tony Fretton that describe and reflect on the projects on show.

The Drawing Matter team would like to thank Tony Fretton and Benjamin Machin for their contributions to the exhibition.

Drawing Matter's public programme offers the public opportunities to experience our drawings collection, which is usually only open to researchers by appointment and for student/practice workshops. Events take the form of talks at the archive, workshops by practitioners and open weekends.

To be notified of future events, subscribe to our newsletter and follow us on Instagram (@drawing.matter)

Performance

Throughout the 1980s I looked for an approach to making architecture that was socially and experientially engaging while speaking as freely about ideas as the visual arts. Robert Morris's sculptures and installations suggested that facts could be a source for compelling form, while Chris Burden's performance works let me understand the power of direct physical engagement with location. Dan Graham's writing, performance and installations showed very lucidly how popular culture could be interrogated to produce things of formal, experiential and intellectual beauty.

By chance I became involved in performance art, and found that it was working with existing physical things and patterns of behaviour—the same things as architecture—but engaging with their underlying ideas in ways that I wanted to make happen in architecture.

In the projects that I designed immediately afterwards for Mute Records (1986) and the first Lisson Gallery (1986), I was intoxicated by unplanned events and material found in the surrounding district, and propelled by a strong sense of the possibilities of the moment. The fecundity with which form occurred in the world gave me the freedom to make form myself. I found that I could work with objects and events that had come into the world by processes other than architecture, and had acquired meaning by being common property. At that point I experienced something similar to what the artist Robert Rauschenberg described as 'working in the space between art and life'. My responsiveness to the material I have described and the circumstances and desires of my clients seemed naturally to produce the rules and methods for making form that had the qualities I wanted.

Excerpted from 'The Same Thing Said Four Times', in Tony Fretton, *AEIOU: Articles, Essays, Interviews and Out-Takes* (Heijningen: Jam Sam Books, 2018), 7.



Get Ready, 1981. Photo-collage, 13 A5 colour prints spray glued, 590 × 835 mm. DMC 2893



Sex and Death, performance by Station House Opera, c.1981–5. DMC 3561.

Mute Records, 1986 (unbuilt)

Tony Fretton, John Green & Ruth Aureole Stuart

Mute took on a lease on a 1970s speculative office building in northwest London occupying a narrow site between Harrow Road and the Regent's Park canal and called us in. The ideas of modernism that had produced rational layouts and generous light were still at play in the building but had been freely compromised into a vernacular. These factors and Mute's working life were the material with which we worked.

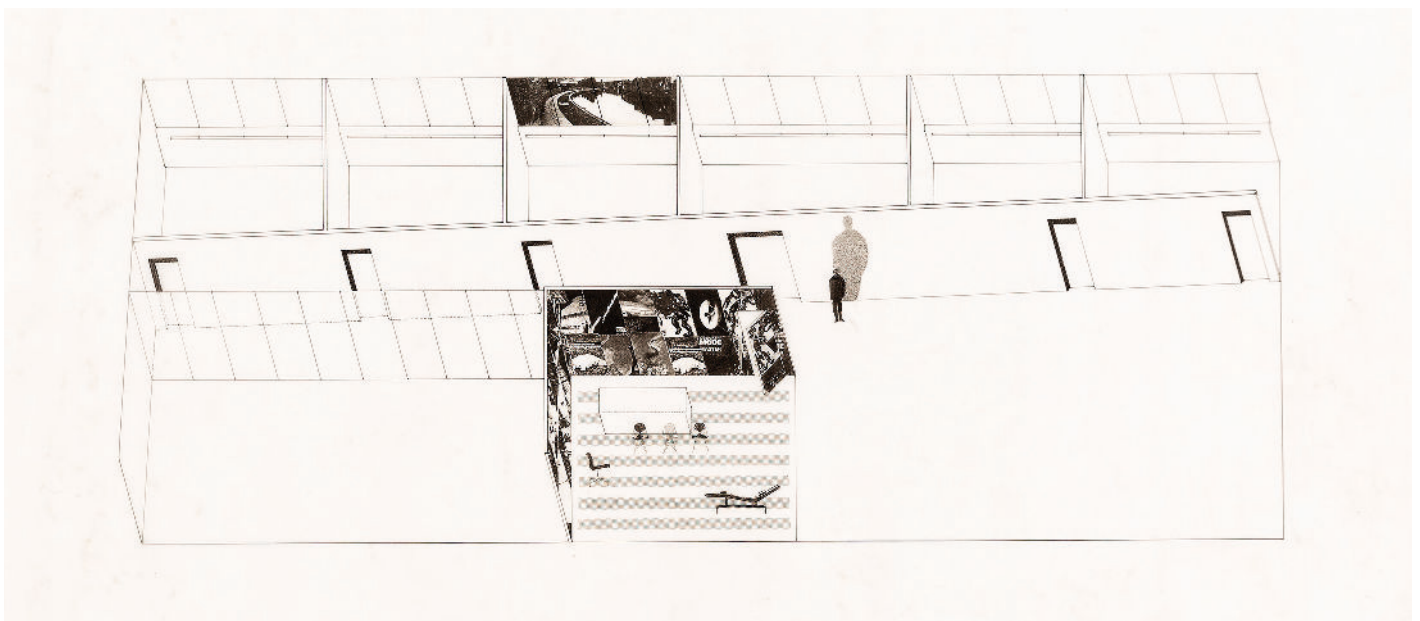
We divided the interior with a long angled sound resisting wall, making spaces on the canal side for A&R people who listened to very loud music, and secure soundproof offices for people dealing with accounts. On the side facing the road there was an open office for tour arrangers, sales people and others who needed to communicate with each other and marked out their territories with furniture, possession and personal sound systems.

A reception area in front kept visitors, people leaving demos and couriers, at

bay, and a secure lobby at street level held back fans. Show business reception areas and theatre bars have a special interest for me. Atmospheric enjoyable places are created without design from wallpaper, photographs and floor tiles. Mute's reception area would be like this, the walls and ceiling continuously fly posted by the company that put Mute posters on the street, and the floor laid out in black-and-white vinyl like modern art. The big angled wall on the other hand was romantically intended to be animated by shadows and reflections with light fittings, desk and doors possessing a tension between doing and saying.

The building is set back from the street and despite its size it is hard to find, for reasons that can only be experienced. Our scheme placed the street number on the parapet as a sky sign and in three-dimensional, human-sized letters in the lobby at street level. There was no need to create an image for the building. People would do this in their own imagination just from the address on a record cover.

Reproduced from 'Mute Records', in Tony Fretton, *AEIOU: Articles, Essays, Interviews and Out-Takes* (Heijningen: Jam Sam Books, 2018), 8.



Mute Records, 1986. Ink on tracing paper, 590 × 830 mm (detail). DMC 2887.7

Lisson Gallery I, 1986

Tony Fretton, Michael Fieldman & Ruth Aureole Stuart.

We were invited to discuss a new building for the Lisson Gallery. Meetings with the director took place in the single room office below the gallery that he shared with all of the staff. To reach it you walked into unguarded exhibition rooms directly from the street, down through a storage area into the basement. On the way, some of the most interesting work by artists such as Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Tony Cragg and Richard Deacon lay within reach, awaiting shipping or casually displayed on the walls of the office.

The gallery felt at ease in its peripheral location, a working district away from the London art quarter, and the site for the new building lay nearby in a terrace of partially occupied and wrecked buildings.

Our first schemes were intoxicated by the tactility of the site and the possibility of art being shown in settings made by the quiet action of disorder, but these visions had to be sublimated into the detail-less language of art buildings, so that the gallery could establish its international status, and they resurfaced in romantic spaces from the bare facts of location and use.

The site is narrow at the front and widens at the back into an area that was added after construction had started. The extent of the space is not apparent from the entrance and is only discovered by walking into the depth of the building. The natural shape is strange and sometimes contradicts perspective.

Daylight enters the front gallery through the translucent glass of the entrance screen, and through the skylight at the back of the gallery where it illuminates the floor for sculpture.

Electric lighting provides more controlled illumination of the walls to suit paintings. The entrance screen and skylight are visible to the viewer from most points in the galleries so that they appear to be entirely lit by daylight.

The front gallery is narrow with a wooden boarded floor and steps down to the back gallery where the acoustic is changed by the room's larger size and paved floor. The basement has a single view through the door to the back gallery, which conveys the presence of daylight at a distance.

The street façade, the entrance screen and the rooms in the second floor apartment are treated as known types from the language of building, so that their formalisms are distinct from those of the artworks on display, and they are designed to resemble similar items in other countries in order to create a sense of placelessness to underline the gallery's internationality.

The character of the exhibition spaces is established in ways that are experienced rather than seen, so that it is the art on display that predominates.

To reach the district where the building is located still requires a special effort. The forms of its streets persist inside the building, but become quieter and more reserved. The rooms are still unguarded and the offices difficult to find, and in the depth of the space there is nothing between you and the art.

The gallery has been absorbed into the later building we designed and its details modified.

Reproduced from 'The Lisson Gallery (1)', in Tony Fretton, *AEIOU: Articles, Essays, Interviews and Out-Takes* (Heijningen: Jam Sam Books, 2018), 11–12.

Lisson Gallery I, 1986

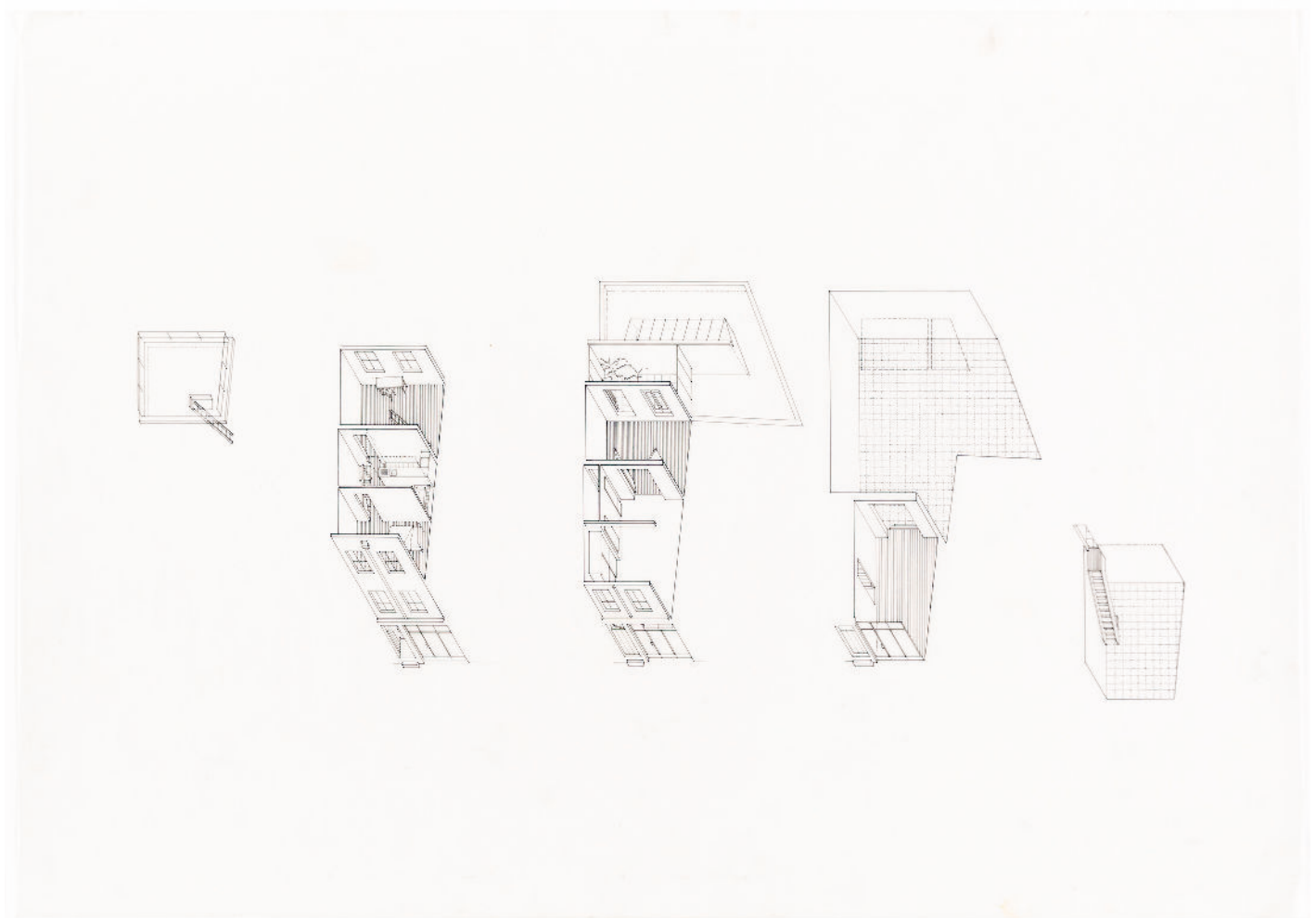
Project isometric

Sometimes you make drawings to tell yourself the project is going okay. Well, that's what I do. This drawing came quite late in the design of the first Lisson Gallery. In the way I used to work, you would reach a point where you'd have a very thorough sense of what the building is, and then you'd take pleasure in drawing it. I drew this to show myself that I knew everything about the project, that there wasn't any doubt about what I was going to do. It also began to express the way that the materials and spatial arrangement were part of the presence of the building.

The interior is different now, but going back to the original design, you would have walked through London, whose forms and geometries would be in your mind when you entered the gallery. Inside, the details

of the city were replaced by the language of white modernism, while the structure of the urban environment remained. A lot of art galleries take you away into a magical space, where you forget about the world outside, but instinctively I didn't want to do that. I wanted to make an abstract version of the areas you would be walking through to reach the gallery. When the building opened I realised what I had done. Design is a very compact activity where you're not sure about what it will do. You work by instinct, and that instinct either unfolds to be something good over time, or it doesn't. While you know that some things will have an immediate effect, the long-term and cultural effects are things you cannot foresee.

Reproduced from 'Tony Fretton: Drawn Closer', *Drawing Matter* (6 February 2020)



Isometric from front, Lisson Gallery I, 1986. Ink on tracing paper, 595 x 840 mm. DMC 2885.9

Lisson Gallery II, 1992

Tony Fretton, Michael Casey (Project Architect), Pia Petterson & Karen Tiedeman

By 1990, the Lisson Gallery had acquired a site adjoining the building we realised for them in 1986 and facing onto a nearby street. The pattern of small shops and houses in the district did not easily allow for larger buildings to be inserted, and the nearby school, office tower and elevated highway have fragmented the original fabric of the area and become fragments themselves, surrounded by space where social engagement was more difficult, although a local community continues to exist and people choose to come and live here. In the street outside the gallery there is a market on Saturdays and the school playground fills with children at break time. Otherwise it is quiet.

Almost unobstructed north light comes across the open playground into the gallery windows, giving composure to the exhibition spaces even though they are very exposed to the street.

Exhibition spaces are medium sized at about 6.5 metres in width and length, and are arranged as single rooms in the basement, ground and first floor. They can be understood separately or as part of an ensemble with each other and the differently scaled rooms of the earlier gallery to which this building is attached. Each exhibition space has slightly different dimensions, which were decided by eye without proportional relationships. They are analogous to incidental open spaces in the surrounding area and share their unforced character. The art is noticed rather than the room, but the room in an indefinable way shapes the experience of exhibitions.

Daylight enters the ground floor steeply and in a great quantity, and its high ceiling gives a large presence. Medium to large pieces can be displayed well, especially single wall mounted works or sculptures and installations that nearly fill the room. Its floor is 90 centimetres below the level of the street in order to align with the earlier building. In consequence people in the street look into the ground floor exhibition space over the heads of those inside and the first floor exhibition space is brought into closer contact with the street. Small and medium sized works display well in the first floor gallery, although its horizontality can be used dynamically for larger pieces such as Dan Graham maquettes.

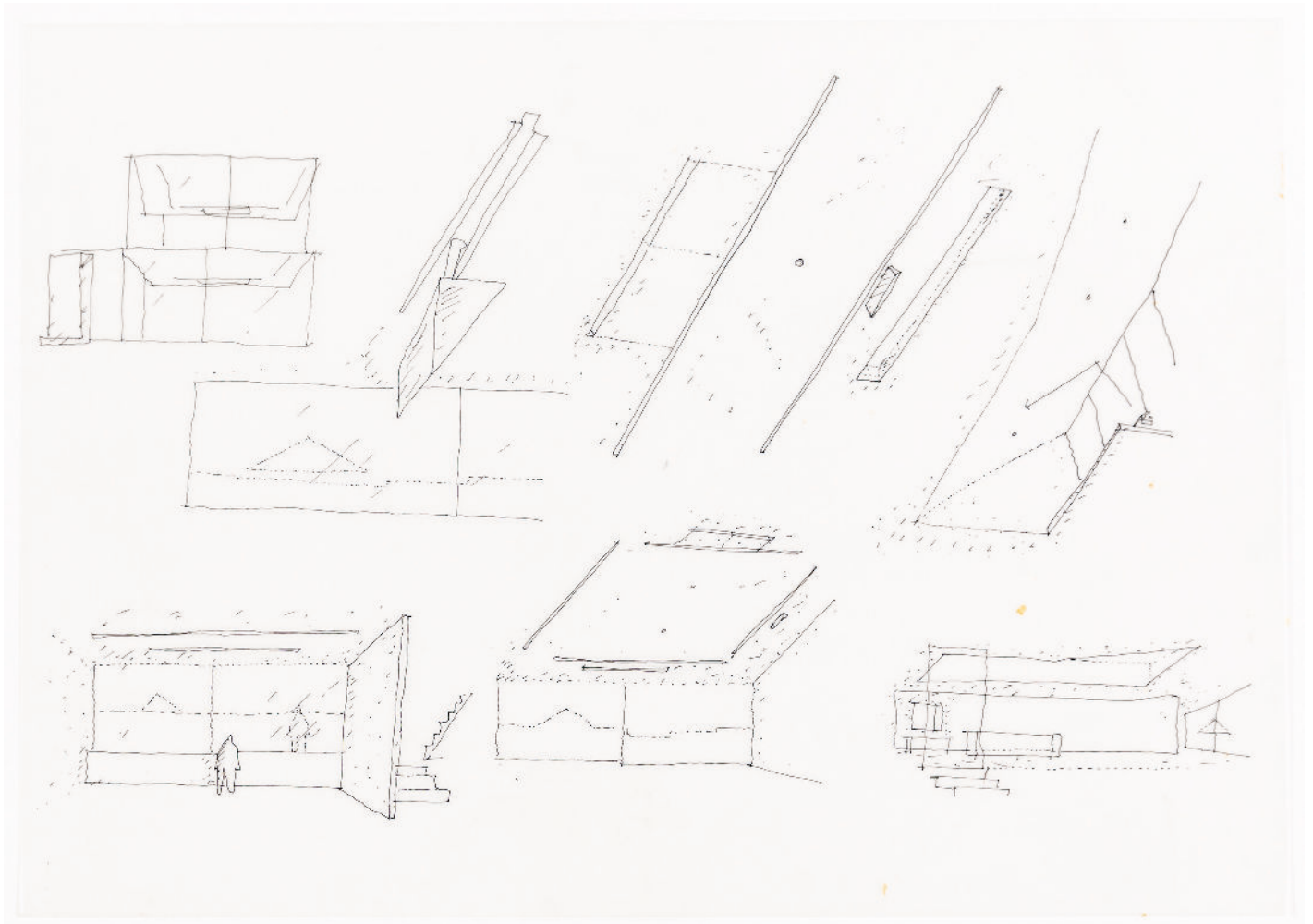
Taller than the first floor, and longer because it extends forward of the building beneath the street, the basement has four good display walls, one of which is day lit by glazing in the pavement.

The windows that fill one side of the ground and first floor spaces give unobstructed outlooks across the surrounding district. Artists have worked interactively with the views or treated them as ambient background. Walls have been built inside to make the galleries windowless and translucent film has been applied to make them quietly illuminated spaces. Conversely, the views of the exhibition spaces from the neighbourhood form the major part of the façade, divided by floor lines that align with those of the 19th-century building next to it. The ground floor façade repeats the older building's arrangement of a shop front and entrance door that have no compositional relationship to the floor above. Overall the façade appears to be made of things found in the surrounding district: large sliding showroom windows, areas of solid stucco and metal panelling, which have been reconfigured to make their appearance and function very close, as in the work of the Swiss architect Hannes Meyer or an authorless object like a boomerang.

In the second and third floors the building looks out to the rear over a wide and very

absorbing view of the neighbourhood. The generality of their plans allows them to be rearranged from an apartment to a workplace, from a workplace to an office and from an office to an apartment. The building is completed by the world around it. In return it intimates public and personal space by appealing to the rudiments of social behaviour.

Reproduced from 'The Lisson Gallery (2)', in Tony Fretton, *AEIOU: Articles, Essays, Interviews and Out-Takes* (Heijningen: Jam Sam Books, 2018), 20–24.



Sketches of exhibition spaces and lighting, c.1991–2. Ink on tracing paper, 298 × 420 mm
DMC 2886.6

On Tony Fretton and the Lisson Gallery

A conversation between Nicholas Logsdail, founder of the Lisson Gallery, and Niall Hobhouse, Drawing Matter's Director.

Nicholas Logsdail: Tony had been a regular visitor to the gallery over the years. Gradually, I got to recognise him and had some fairly cryptic conversations with him from time to time – and then some very good ones about architects and gallery space. I think we were talking about how I had just been to the Sainsbury Centre for the first time, and I was not very impressed by it. I thought it was a waste of money, a waste of space, but not that it wasn't worth doing, you know.

We started talking about how an exhibition space was often better without architects, very much coming out of the idea of the New York repurposing of loft space, the repurposing of the buildings in Varese by Count Panza, and the repurposing of Soho as arts space, living space, gallery space, etc. And about how, in a way, architects could become very jealous of artists, and aspired to have the gravitas of great artists in the way that, maybe in the past, the great architects of the Renaissance might have had. For different reasons, because it was a different kind of social environment. What I began to recognise with Tony was that he wasn't a branding type of architect. He was extremely thoughtful about not just how it looked but about its purpose. You know, even the old Louis Sullivan function before form.

He started coming in with Mark Pimlott, who is his mate, and he was talking to me about doing a performance at the gallery – it never happened. He seemed to understand the art world that interested me, rather than the sort of snobby art world that I have some disdain for still, although we make a lot of money out of it now. But I do have disdain for it, because it is show-off stuff. The best art never came

up in that. Although some good art does come out of show-off stuff, so it's not that simple. You can't be dogmatic about it. What was very clear with Tony was that he was very devoted to the idea of doing something. I brought him and Dan Graham together. I think that they were both quite suspicious of each other, and probably still are to this day. I think there is a long recorded interview we have in the archive, which neither of them have published, if I remember rightly.

Niall Hobhouse: You already had Bell Street at that point?

NL: Oh yes. We had bought the derelict building with a view of growing the gallery, one building on Lisson Street and two more on Bell Street round the corner from the original gallery. It was very clear that it was just running out of time and space; it was no longer the sort of late '60s, '70s conceptual art gallery. We needed more space. It was growing because we were doing well. We had great artists. The London art world didn't really know about the Lisson Gallery. But you go to New York, you go to Paris, you go to Düsseldorf or Rome and everybody knew about it.

NH: I do see exactly what you mean.

NL: Or they didn't know about... who were the other galleries around at that time in London? They didn't know, hadn't heard of, the Marlborough Gallery, for example. It was a different world I entered, and I was very protected by being in Bell Street. I remember Tony became a friend, and when I told him I needed an architect he said, 'What do you want?' to which I said, 'I want space. Space that is not competing with the artist, that is as far as possible lit naturally and feels good to be in.' I think that a lot of architecture that is created for art is actually quite hostile to the art, and it is so over-insistent, architecturally. It might even be great architecture, but it is not appropriate to compete with the artist. That goes back to the idea of the architect being jealous of the artist and trying to emulate the celebrity of the artist. As they

have, actually, in many instances. Which again is complicated because it is not demeaning to architects who have such ambition, it's just a point of view. It's an attitude of mind if you like, and Tony didn't have that.

NH: Where that conflict becomes explicit is that it is not only demeaning to art, that 'look at me' architecture, but it's always very demeaning to the city. 'Look at me' buildings are very aggressive.

NL: Yes. The great artists of my era didn't set out to be celebrity artists. That happened later with you know who – to remain nameless... That was the advent of a new era.

NH: How did Tony have time to fill 43 sketchbooks?

NL: I had no idea he had done so many sketchbooks. I just said: 'I want a space that artists will aspire to show in, and aspire to make great work to show in that space, because the very process of being in that space, you enter into the space and you don't know why you are feeling good.' You don't attribute it to the architecture. You don't necessarily attribute it to the art. Once you have actually looked at a show and recognised that there is something really interesting about that artist's work, then you can attribute it to that. Then you can look at the space and say, 'Yes. This all works and holds together as a singular experience of the two together.'

NH: One of the things that I remember about it when I went very early on, was how coherent it was in terms of the details. I mean did you decide very early on to allow Tony to really design everything?

NL: Well, I gave him a brief, which was repetition, repetition, repetition. No trademark design, like little details, 'Oh, that's a Tony Fretton detail.' You know what I mean? It was something we both agreed upon. We did a lot of models. I just wanted to see how it worked, the light and so on.

NH: No lighting engineers?

NL: No.

NH: Because that's one of the nice things about the sketchbooks, is there are these endless studies.

NL: No lighting consultants. I think we did get the folks from Erco in Dover Street and one of their lighting experts recommended their latest wall washer halogen lights, which is actually what I asked for. I said, I want lights that don't spotlight, but just give you an even light throughout, and you can, if possible, dim it, either by turning the colour temperature down.

It is all about colour temperature in a way; mixing daylight with artificial light, if you need it, and switching it off if you don't. And, if possible, it switches off automatically when you have got enough light overhead.

NH: Did you find in the event that the building functioned in the way that you had both imagined it?

NL: Yes and no. It did what we were talking about. It didn't do it all. But we didn't expect it to. You know, the idea of perfection is a very false idea, a very false premise in anything, more or less, in a work of art. For an artist to aspire to make a perfect work of art, it's quite a nice aspiration, and a necessary one, but it doesn't happen that way. Actually, the perfect work of art usually happens the other way round. It happens somehow by some strange subconscious serendipitous coming together of things.

NH: Which of the spaces did you imagine as the principle space, or did you not think of it that way?

NL: Well, you see, because we were governed by the site and the peculiarities of it, from the medieval to the 17th, 18th, and then the 19th Century. In the 18th Century that whole area started to develop. Before that Bell Street had been there for a very, very long time, houses along that street and a few little side streets. In a way, I think when the early Victorian

buildings were built, they were the first brick and mortar buildings. They were very irregular. There was no town planning at that time and it wasn't an important part of town. Hence, the larger space has no right angles.

That was very interesting to both of us. We talked about squaring it all up, but we'd lose so much space. We'd have lost 500 square feet by squaring it up.

NH: To what end?

NL: For no purpose. You have just made a boring box instead of this very beautiful, unusual space. Sometimes awkward, but generally not. The challenge with that space for artists was not only to make an interesting show, but that work can look better when you take it out of the orthodoxy of the white cube.

Reproduced from 'On Tony Fretton and the Lisson Gallery', *Drawing Matter* (5 February 2021)

Kagyu Samye Ling Tibetan Buddhist Centre (competition entry), 1993

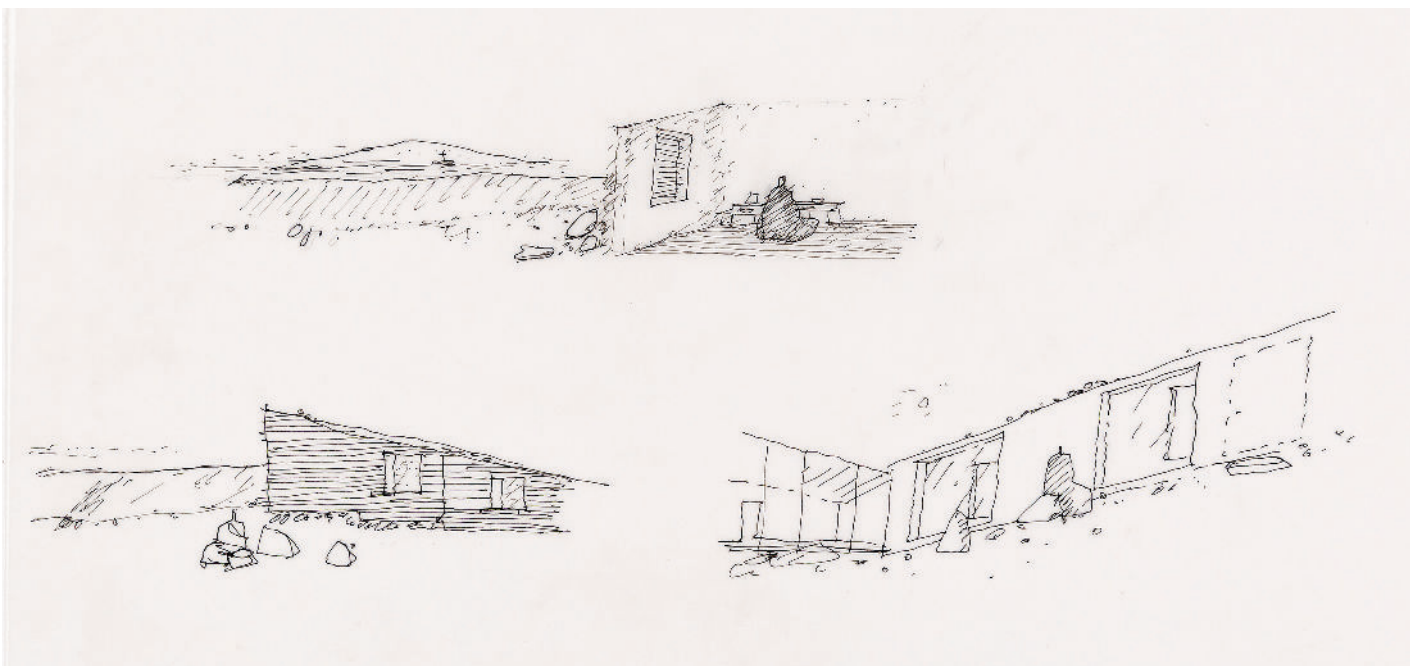
To reach Holy Island, you leave Glasgow on the local railway, take a ferry and then walk to a small jetty on the Isle of Arran where, if the weather and tide permit, a small boat will take you across. Each stage of the journey is harder and more rudimentary than the last. There is nothing on this island except small buildings, the faint remains of Celtic civilisation, and a rocky terrain that is sometimes very steep. There are no roads on which to transport building materials.

Two buildings were to be located at the furthest end of the island—one for women, the other for men—where members of the community would spend many hours in solitary meditation. In each building, the communal refectory, shrine room and yoga studio with its outside court were situated on a level platform facing the sea. Ranged up the slope behind them were the cells where people would live and meditate. A walled garden was laid out around the cells and a courtyard and ambulatory in the interior to provide outdoor spaces where retreatants could walk and sit in sunlight, sheltered from the wind.

The new buildings would be far larger and different from any other on the island. Materials were chosen that would have the natural colours and textures of the island. Unpainted timber boarding would cover the exterior and would go grey and inconspicuous in time. Stone would be collected from the island for garden walls and to cover the insulation on the roof, which would be very visible from the sea. Timber, brought by boat and accrued by hand, would give a well insulated frame structure resting directly on the rock and following the contours of the land.

Each building would develop a different form from the same plan. According to the shape of the ground on which it stood, a gesture that makes an analogy between the building and natural species that share a common structure but are given individual shape by circumstance.

Excerpted from <https://www.tonyfretton.com/holyisland/index.html>



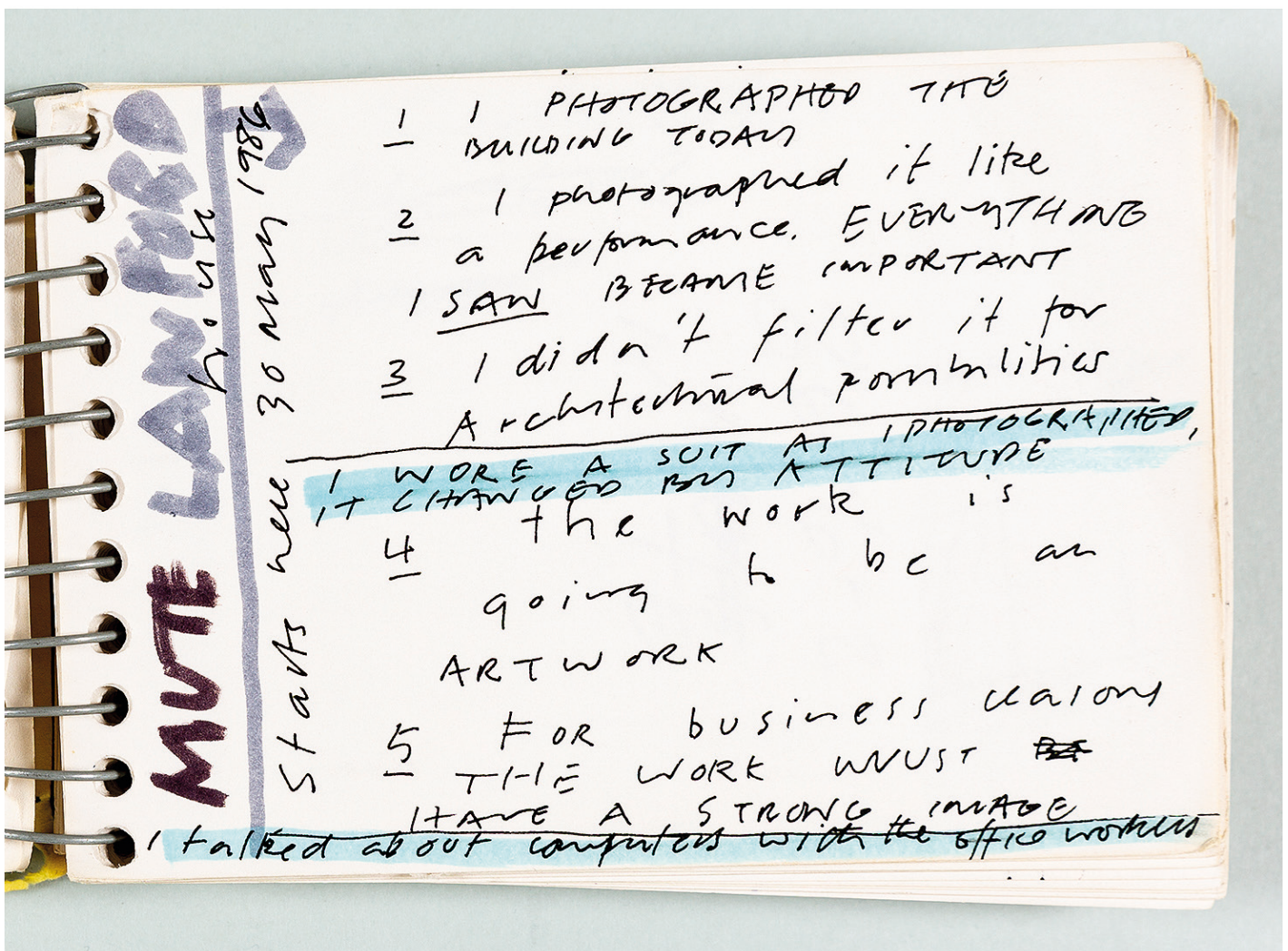
Sketches of the cells and courtyard, 1993. Ink on tracing paper, 298 x 420 mm (detail)
DMC 2888.8

Sketchbooks

Surely the question is how do sketchbooks fit into a practice as a whole: what other materials were made to develop the project and how did the sketching work with that? The sketchbooks to me were working things, which meant working with how I think as an architect. That is why there are notes and observations in the sketchbooks, sometimes to spur me on, sometimes to define a position. The words were about that, because as an architect, I am concerned with material objects and their impact on people and the world. The physical objects become imbued with meaning; they form part of the vocabulary of your work. I can certainly say that the sketchbook reflects the possibility of an architecture. This, of course, depends

on what stage you are at in your career. These were early sketches—the formation of bases on which my practice then proceeded; and they were a fundament, and so a reflection on a possibility that one cannot get by building. You have to investigate more broadly, and some of that I have described, the capacity of buildings to be both reticent and demonstrative of experience while not foregrounding themselves. No one else wants to make an architecture that looks at degrees to which a building can be expressive or inexpressive. So that is what the sketchbooks are about. I was looking for an architectural method.

Excerpted from *Opening Lines III: Tony Fretton* (Somerset: Drawing Matter, 2018)



'I photographed it like a performance. EVERYTHING I SAW BECAME IMPORTANT', page from 1986 sketchbook. DMC 2895.14.4