

Reinvention of a Lost Interior World

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ABSTRACT

This visual essay explores interiority through drawing into a grandmother's world in the 1950s, Taiwan. My grandmother's house had never been documented prior to its demolition in 1980. This paper is intended to re-invent and re-imagine the potentially changeable, layered and multi-functional interior settings of that house through the act of drawing. Drawing was undertaken through collaging the lost domestic world and became an act of complicity with my distant heritage and a sign of recognition of a shared condition.

The house was an economic unit; she shared the house with animals, sewing machines and bentos. Bento is the term used for 'lunchbox' and usually 'layered' in content. Bento became an object and metaphor for this project that formed a link between the object, the house and the drawing process. Plans and sections are constructed to induce analysis and architectural readings between domestic events: farming, sewing, education, dressmaking and accommodation.

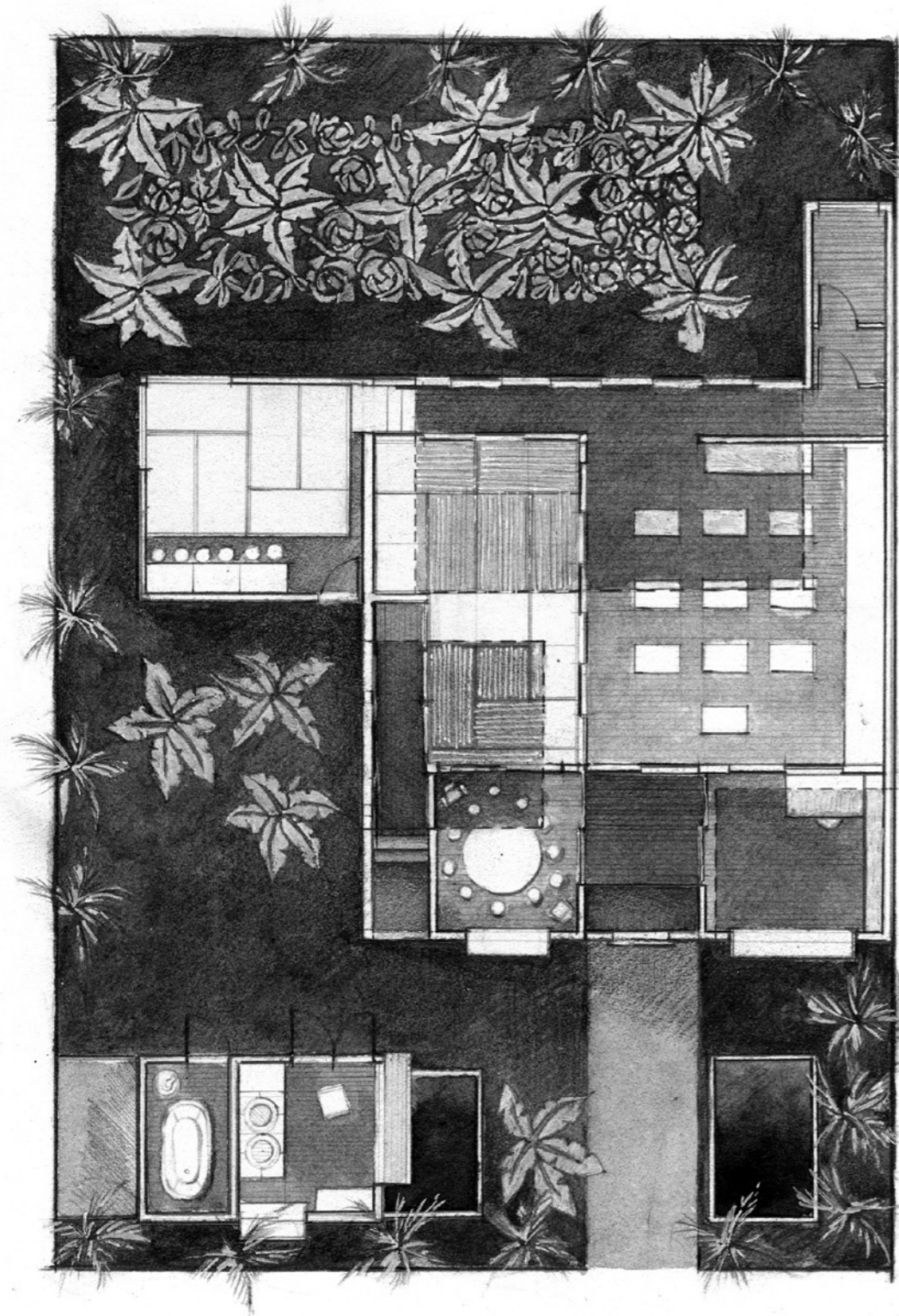
The interior resisted the stable and singular condition of the domestic setting and challenged the 'everyday-ness' of the house to propose a potentially more adaptable and variable living unit. The interiors of the house were negotiated and fluctuated between changing desires of the inhabitants, re-inventing forms and patterns throughout the day. Five drawings were generated for this project representing the interiority of the house. The first collaged interior (Figure 1) initiated a connection to the process of pattern-making and became a drawing that compressed together time and was followed by four watercolour drawings that described the house in its particular moments of time.

PATTERNS OF TIME

This visual essay draws from philosopher Immanuel Kant's idea of 'reflective thinking' to provoke a series of drawn operations of an interior world in 1950s Taiwan to enable the interpretation of time and its past experiences through the application of colour, pattern and materiality, 'Reflective judgement is a special kind of thinking available to the individual because it is the ability to produce relationships between the individual, or a particular experience, and the world.'¹ The reconstructions of the interiors seek to trigger visualisations of the house and to explore the potential of spatial qualities. These drawings become the collection of past events, objects and time that together recompose sections of a lost world. As theorist Donald Kunze described, architectural drawing should be thought of as a 'thinking machine' that is able to reconstruct and recreate the events between time and space.²



Above
Figure 1: A Pattern of Time, watercolor and photographic material, 235mmx550mm, 2011. Sara Lee



The house was constructed in timber with its style influenced by traditional Japanese houses because of the Japanese occupation of Taiwan between 1895-1945. The single level house inhabited by fourteen people³ was elevated from the ground providing an additional level to house turkeys and to store collections of recycling material and firewood. This space is an outer interior; a layer in between the texture of the ground and the floorboards. As described by my mother, this was the 'drawer space' below the house, making the in-between space perform most efficiently.

My grandmother was a dressmaker (Figure. 3). The original central space of the house had a small built-in kitchen and a large storage unit for bedding. My grandmother redefined the idea of the 'family room' by relocating the central cooking area to an additional unit separated from the main house, and rearranged the living space to make it both a teaching space for a sewing class and a family sleeping space on tatami mats. *A Pattern of Time* (Figure. 1) is constructed using the language of my grandmother's world; it translated the shifting programs into operative strategies for drawing. The regeneration of patterns and forms used in dressmaking became processes of redrawing and retracing memories. The linear operations in sewing became rendered treatments of layering, stitching and collaging. This drawing became the initial pattern for the visual essay and activated re-imaginings of this lost interior world held in my memory.

This domestic world is made up of three key units; the main house, the additional cooking and washing house, and the attached bamboo house for accommodation. All of these units are activated in relationship to each other, with the domestic farming of vegetation and animals making the connection between the house units and the house's economy inseparable and inter-dependant. The open plan interior was able to be sectioned by sliding doors and moveable furniture which allowed the spaces to be reconfigured as required to maximise the functionality of the domestic living area (Figure. 2).⁴ Although the interiors were able to be divided, the sliding doors were only closed at night for sleeping, and by day the interiors operated openly between economic sectors of trade and domestic utilities without division. The flexible interior allowed changeability of events and induced unpredictability in the everyday through the generation of unexpected spatial permutations.

My grandmother's house was enriched with its domestic farming because of my grandfather. He was the vet for the animals of the local sugar factory. Sugar was one of Taiwan's key exports at the time, and the house was part of a sugar farming community built to accommodate the workers' families. When my grandfather died, the house required more space for trade and exchange. The additional unit for cooking and washing was an enlarged sector extracted and separated from the main house (Figure. 4) in order to make room for larger sewing classes and to open up a private dressmaking service in the living area. The washing space is located adjacent to the cooking stove, making the wall separating these programs a strangely intimate site for everyday family conversations. My grandmother was always cooking when the children returned from school; almost all of the family dialogues initiated over cooking and washing. Next to the cooking and

Opposite

Figure 2: *The Plan in Memory*, watercolor and pencil
150mmx220mm, 2011. Sara Lee

washing house were the frog and poultry farm. The animals farmed in the garden were mostly sold to the local restaurant owners and markets to generate additional income for the household. My mother told me that the household relied on boxed dried fish and meat, dried cauliflower, mushrooms and cucumbers bought in bulk from the local market for everyday meals and *bentos*.

Drawing architectural sections was used as a strategy to make connections between recollections of these interior spaces and to recreate the dynamic interactions of the interior world. Plan and section drawings represent the sliced memories of my grandmother's world in parts and translate the eventful everyday-ness in a 'stacked' and layered condition like the preparation of *bentos*.⁵ The interior spaces were able to be transformed by the activities throughout the day – dividing, trimming, stitching and patching together parts of the interior setting to generate diverse spatial experiences.

The sewing class held by my grandmother for local women and girls became a dressmaking service (Figure. 5). The students were key members of the household when the children left in the morning. They would help to feed the animals and prepare lunches in between sewing demonstrations, practices and customer measure-ups. The ordered garments became practice pieces in the sewing class and the bedding wardrobe was filled with stacks of fabrics and dresses under construction. This domestic interior shifted from a privatised unit to an open site for trade and education in order to sustain the most effective economic environment.

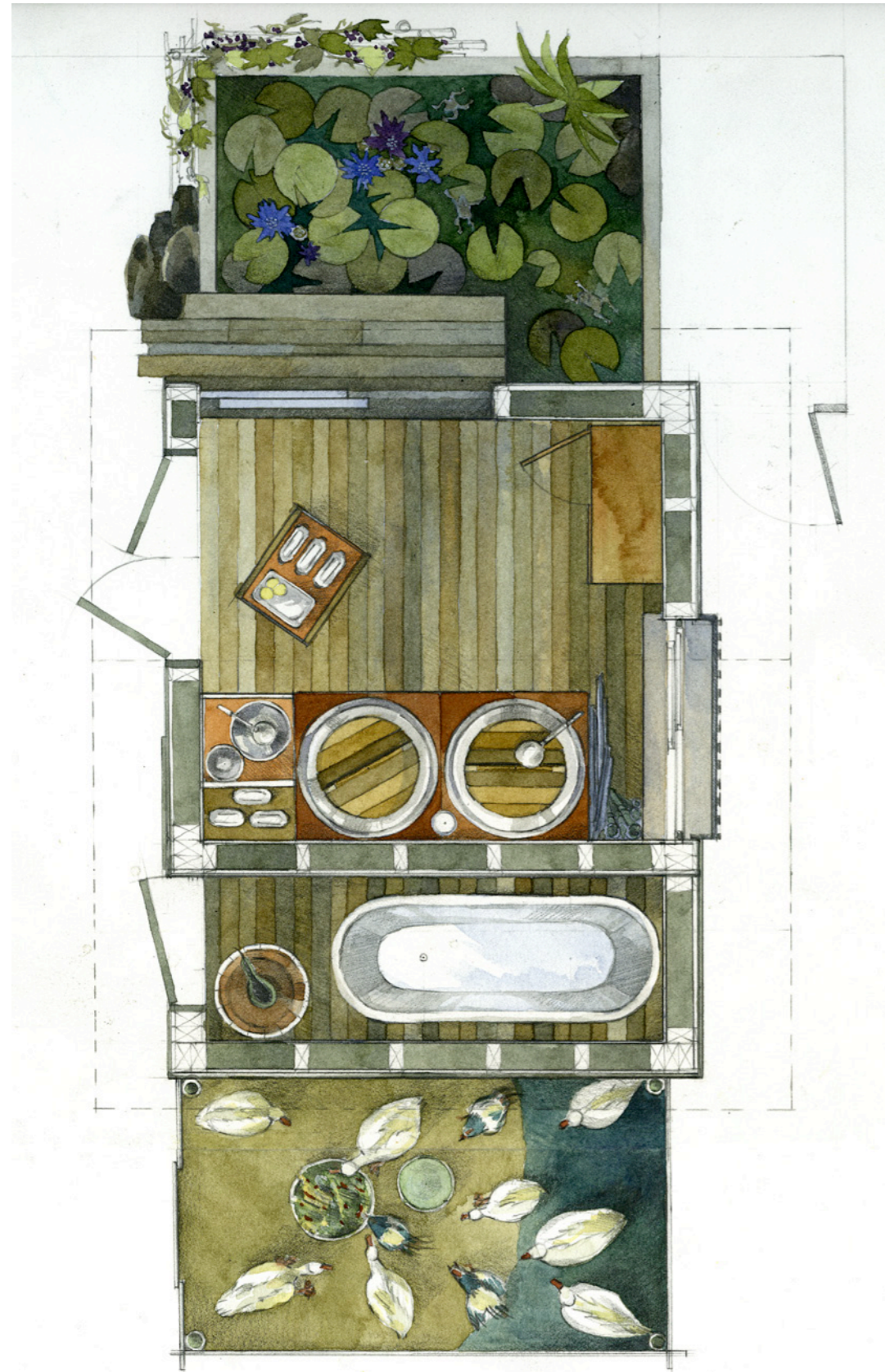
During the day the traditional private living space would break away from the domestic world and turned into a site for both social and economic exchange, before reverting back to its interior purpose by night. Interiors for eating, sleeping and accommodation (Figure. 6) were also interactively adapted for economic purposes. The sleeping space was covered in tatami mats on the floorboards next to the sewing machines. The sewing area realigned itself as part of the domestic realm and returned from its expanded interior condition back into a sleeping and reading space for the family. Bedding was rolled out onto the tatami mats and, to prevent mosquitoes, a fine meshed net would be pinned to the beams in the elevated ceiling space, wrapping together the interior dynamics of the house and reducing the complex patterns of the house into a singular condition.

A GLIMPSE INTO A LOST WORLD

The linear qualities of the architectural drawing became the linking figures to my grandmother's interior world. As mentioned by theorist Peg Rawes, the geometries within a drawing can be reinterpreted as 'an activity that is inherently constructed out of aesthetic experience, so that geometric figures become linked to the reflective powers of the individual subject.'⁶ The drawings provoke imaginary occupation of the lost interiors and the text becomes the linking context for these drawings. I meet my grandmother in memory, in her space that is fabricated by drawings, collaged from my mother's conversations and recollections: domestic space emerges anew in bright images of a distant time.



Above
Figure 3: My Grandmother, family photograph, 1950



Opposite
Figure 4: Cooking and Washing House, watercolor and pencil,
220mmx450mm, 2011. Sara Lee

Above
Figure 5: Library, Sewing Class and Turkey, watercolor and pencil,
235mmx550mm, 2011. Sara Lee



NOTES

1. Peg Rawes, "Acts of imagination and reflection on architectural design," in *From Models to Drawings*, ed. Marco Frascari et al., (London; New York : Routledge, 2007), 262.
2. Donald Kunze, "Concealment, delay and topology in the creation of wondrous drawing," in *From Models to Drawings*, ed. Marco Frascari et al., (London; New York: Routledge, 2007), 137.
3. My grandmother, my mother and three other siblings lived in the main house; eight students lived in the accommodation unit. There was also a girl of a family friend sent from the countryside to stay with my grandmother until she was married.
4. As Mary-Ann Ray suggested, "The house has the ability to 'move' against the inhabitants at the same time that the inhabitants move against the house." Mary-Ann Ray, "Gecekodu", in *Architecture of the Everyday*, ed. Steven Harris and Deborah Berke, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), 156.
5. The contents of bentos are layered from rice at the bottom; stir fried vegetables, half boiled egg or fried omelet with pickled vegetable, dried fish to the stewed meat with soy sauce at the top. Bentos were made fresh as lunchboxes in the morning.
6. Peg Rawes, "Acts of imagination and reflection on architectural design," in *From Models to Drawings*, ed. Marco Frascari et al., (London; New York: Routledge, 2007), 264.

Opposite
 Figure 6: Eating, Washing & Sleeping, watercolor and pencil,
 505mmx380mm, 2011, Sara Lee