

Modelling the Interior: opening up the doll's house

Ana Araujo : University College, and Ro Spankie : University of Westminster, UK

ABSTRACT

Unlike the architecture that contains it, the domestic interior is not a solid entity, nor is it empty space. Rather, it is a fluid mobile field, filled with the detail of everyday life. Organic and self-organising by nature, the interior provides an enigmatic site for design research and innovation.

One of the problems facing the designer in discussing the domestic interior is the inability to represent it in three dimensions. What is needed is a modelling tool that shifts the focus from form to function, from whole to the fragment, from walls to wallpaper. This paper proposes to retrieve the doll's house from the toy cupboard and re-examine it as a potential 'modelling tool' for interpreting and fabricating the domestic interior. Using a series of case-studies, we propose to use the doll's house, firstly, as a critical tool to analyse the possible role of the model in the interior. Secondly, we propose to look at ways that the fabrication of a doll's house might engage the student or designer in a process of making that is comparable to the practice of interior design.

INTRODUCTION

Due to the expense and complexity of the finished object, architectural research and innovation has traditionally been located at the design phase: the designer uses drawings and models, both as critical tools and as means of representation for design proposition. The root of the word 'design' is 'disegno' (Lat) meaning drawing: the literal drawing of a line on paper and the drawing forth of an idea from the mind.¹ However, architectural design tools, so adept at describing built matter, are less successful at describing the interior space it contains. This is particularly true of the model. The abstract nature of the architectural model requires a removal of detail as one reduces scale to focus on architectural concerns such as volume and light. There is an optimistic belief that the design of the architectural envelope ensures the inevitable creation of the interior within. But the resulting interiors are just empty space, devoid of all the furniture and objects that make them understandable as domestic.

The doll's house however, conventionally thought of as a children's toy, can also be understood as a miniaturised or scaled reproduction of interior domestic space. This paper will attempt to open up the doll's house as a possible means of representation for interiors, looking at how it might function both as an analytical and productive tool, finally investigating how it might open up new forms of thinking and designing interiors.

The first section will ask what a doll's house is, discussing the way it emphasises a lifelike representation of objects, surfaces and characters, accounting for their materiality and scenographic qualities and thereby dealing with aspects that are specific to the practice of interiors. We will also explore how the doll's house operates as both an artefact and a representation, understood and experienced as a real and as an image-based condition, in the sense discussed by Charles Rice in *The Emergence of the Interior*.² The second section will look at the fabrication of doll's houses and at ways of making that are intrinsic to this fabrication, such as flattening, scaling down and the use



Above
Figure 1: Nuremberg House, 1673.
© V&A Images/Victoria and Albert Museum, London

of found objects. These ways of making can work as a source of inspiration for architecture and interior design and potentially stimulate renewed pedagogical approaches for teaching these disciplines.

THE DOLL'S HOUSE AS AN ANALYTICAL TOOL: WHAT IS A DOLL'S HOUSE?

Over time the doll's house – or baby house as it was also known – has played many roles. Originally furnishing the world of the adult, it served as a status symbol for the wealthy and a cabinet of curiosities or 'wunderkammer' of the miniature. By the seventeenth century, it was used as a visual tool for practical instruction to teach young girls their household duties. More recently, its mass production as a toy resulted in its relegation to the children's nursery. Throughout all these transformations the doll's house has continuously operated as a pattern book or microcosm of the domestic environment, rather than as a model of the architecture that contains it.³



What do we mean by this? If we look at the example of the Nuremburg House portrayed above it is clear that, although it refers to the architectural styles of the day, it is more concerned with domestic arrangements and details of family life, such as the two kitchens: on the right, the 'working' kitchen with all the hung utensils and a charcoal cooking stove; on the left the 'best' kitchen or dining room that would have been used to entertain guests. The house is viewed from one side only and makes no attempt to show more architectural elements such as a staircase or any circulation. The four rooms provide four empty boxes, or backdrops for a scenographic representation of objects, surfaces and characters (Figure 1). As John Berger has articulated: 'Home is represented not by a house, but by a set of practices. Everyone has his own.'⁴ The doll's house models objects and arrangement rather than form and space, and in doing so represents 'practice' as opposed to form.

If one understands the doll's house as a representation, it occupies the curious position of being both a doll's house and a scaled-

down representation of something: an artefact and a model. This ambiguous condition interferes in its relationship with its context (Figure 2).

A doll's house is an artefact in the same sense that a piece of furniture is, and as such it has a mobile relationship to its immediate physical context. Unlike the building it alludes to, a doll's house may be moved many times during its lifetime and has no control of the room in which it is placed; of its exterior context, so to speak. The context the doll's house responds to is therefore more generic and alludes to the wider cultural position of the interior. As with the practice of interiors, this context refers to issues of style, taste and 'practice' as much as physical context. The doll's house can be said to privilege the interior over the exterior.

The architectural model, on the other hand, understands itself first and foremost as a representation, and the design is often driven by the desire to refer to its physical context and to the buildings



that will surround the final building. The architectural model, it could be claimed, privilege the exterior over the interior.

THE DOLL'S HOUSE IS USED OVER TIME AND INVITES PARTICIPATION

Architectural models are often finely crafted and delicate. Although they can be populated with mobile elements such as plastic figures or furniture, these tend to be fixed and there is an understanding they should not be touched. The architectural model refers to a single moment in time. The doll's house, on the contrary, because of its status as a toy, invites play not just by its creator during the design phase, but also by the client or user. This has two consequences. Firstly, in order to satisfy its status as an artefact it must be much more robust than the average model. Secondly, it is never finished in the way an architectural model is: things can be added and taken away over time, as happens in the domestic interior it refers to (Figure 3).



In this digital era, there is a great deal of discussion about dynamic modelling, evolutionary techniques and user interaction. Yet, often these techniques are so complex that the client or user feels unable to interact. The familiarity of the doll's house as an artefact makes it a highly accessible representational tool understood by everyone. This means that if the doll's house is used as a tool for spatial design, the authorship is shared between the user and the designer.⁵ It also opens up questions of originality and the role of the designer, which are relevant not only to discussions of the model, but to interiors as a practice.

THE DOLL'S HOUSE AS A SPACE FOR THINKING ABOUT INTERIORITY

The doll's house is a miniaturised reproduction of an interior domestic space. The world of the doll's house is one of interiority, literally as well as metaphorically, and this in itself indicates its peculiar affinity with the practice of interior design (Figure 4). If, as

Opposite
Figure 2: Doll's house, V&A Collection, London. Photo by Ana Araujo.

Above left
Figure 3: View of observer. Photo by Ro Spankie.

Above right
Figure 4: Doll's house, V&A Collection, London. Photo by Ana Araujo.

argued by Philip Tabor in *Striking Home: the Telematic Assault on Identity*, architecture may be thought to articulate a conflict between interiority and exteriority, the doll's house, as Stewart claims, 'represents the tension between two modes of interiority'.⁶ Existing often within an enclosed domestic space, it articulates a condition of a 'centre within a centre, within within within'.⁷ Because of this doll's house, like the interior, is challenging to model because one is designing inside a box, inside the architectural envelope. In order to allow an audience a view *into* an interior design proposal there are a variety of conventions such as lifting the lid or taking away a wall. The doll's house provides a recognisable set of strategies to refer to such as the use of the hinged front façade.

Referring essentially to the interior, but also alluding to spatial design as whole, the doll's house promises to both take into account the specificity of interiors and to challenge, if obliquely, prevailing routines in architectural practice. Its role is therefore, on the one hand, productive and analytical, and, on the other hand, critical, insofar as it may question and potentially even transform architectural procedures. As such, the doll's house may shift the prevailing hierarchy that commonly assigns to interiors a secondary position in relation to architecture. As it consists of an interior-specific tool that may interfere in architecture's mode of practice, it implies that architecture might be transformed and redefined by the practice of interiors.

THE DOLL'S HOUSE AS A PRODUCTIVE TOOL: DESIGNING WITH FOUND OBJECTS – ON ALTERING AND RE-USE

The 'Secret House', fabricated by Oxford Brookes' Interior Architecture students Mami Sayo and Helen Warren, plays with the childhood desire to construct fantasy worlds, hidden houses and camps. It also refers to the interior practice of operating within an existing building and

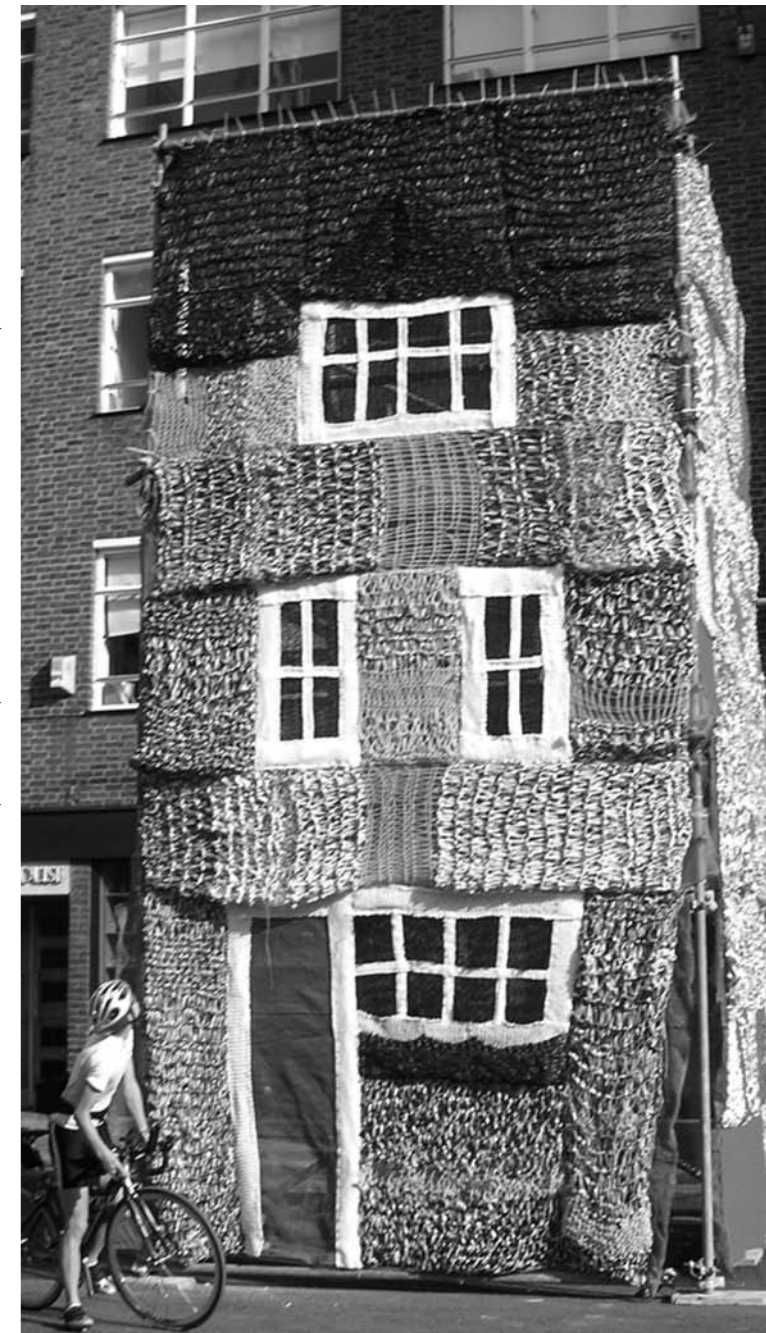


reinventing found objects. Using an old carriage clock as a starting point, this domestic interior was carefully constructed without disturbing the existing clock mechanism. From the front, there is no hint to the occupation, except for the light shining from the shaft where the clock can be wound up. On opening the back, a fairytale world shines out. Referring both to the domestic – through the use of wallpaper and typical furnishings – and to the fantastical – as the heavy brass pendulum swings amongst matchstick chairs – its appeal lies not only in discovering a secret but also in the strange juxtapositions of scale (Figure 5).

The doll's house fires the imagination as it connects us to the world of childhood. Childhood, as Stewart argues, is spatially and temporally miniaturised for adults. Spatially, it speaks of a scaled down dimension no longer accessible to our grown up bodies: the secretive spaces under tables and stairs, the overlooked gaps on the floor or the wall, the internal rooms of a clock machine. Temporally, it glimpses a remote period of our lives, visualised, in Susan Stewart's words, 'as if on the other end of a tunnel – distanced, diminutive and clearly framed'.⁸ Our vision of childhood is both remote and intimate, impregnating the spaces, objects and memoirs we identify with it with a similarly evocative, nostalgic feeling. The doll's house operates in this register of remoteness, nostalgia and intimacy, communicating, in Stewart's words, an 'exaggeration of interiority': an interiority which is not only physical but also emotional. The Secret House alludes to this intimate and nostalgic territory by building an interior within an old object. Often, interior design practice does precisely the same, and for this reason, like the Secret House, it invokes the everyday as well as the dreamlike.

DESIGNING AS CRAFT-MAKING

While design-based practices are generally motivated by a desire to innovate and be creative, the doll's house conveys, instead, a predilection for the traditional and the customary. As it perpetuates an idea of domesticity that relies on familiarity and identification, the doll's house emphasises what is recognisable



Opposite
Figure 5: Secret House, Mami Sayo & Helen Warren. Interior photo
© Marco Caselli Nirmal

Above
Figure 6: Knitted house, by Ana Araujo, Pooja Asher, Erica Calogero, Ana Matic, Sagit Yakutieli and Jenny Wynness

and unoriginal. Contrary to the notion of inventive production with which design-based processes are usually associated, the doll's houses connect with repetitive reproduction.

Constructed like a gigantic doll's house, the 'Knitted House' shown above in Figure 6 looks at processes of making, and how these influence the practice of design. In *On Longing*, Stewart notices that not only doll's houses but also other miniatures often rely on a specific, craft-based method of fabrication that makes them unique.⁹

Stewart's observation implies that innovation might be connected not to the creation of something new, but rather with the reconstruction of the existing employing a new technique. The Knitted House was a reconstruction of a typical London townhouse using the technique of hand knitting, and it generated a unique artefact. Such an engagement with making and matter, rather than with forms and ideas, might, we believe, prove deeply insightful for spatial design practices such as architecture and interiors.



DESIGNING AS REPRODUCING

The 'Silhouette Dining Box', designed by Ana Araujo, consists of an interior design project based on the practice of reproduction. Inspired by the model of the doll's house, which, in contrast to the general tendency manifest in design-based practices, relies more on the notion of repetition than invention, this project recreates a traditional dining set by reconstructing its silhouette profile.

Silhouette profiling, a pre-photographic form of portraiture, was a favourite domestic pastime in Europe and the United States around the mid-eighteenth century. It constituted a cheaper and more democratic version of the cameo profile, a miniaturised bust carved in marble to represent a human profile. Both the white marble bust and the black silhouette were considered mysterious and fascinating for their ability to convey a sense of vividness and distinctiveness in a totally austere and static art form. This was attributed to their process of imprinting shadows, which to some meant the same as imprinting souls. Silhouettes were in the eighteenth and the nineteenth century often used for diagnosing characters, being connected to other superstitious practices such as phrenology and palmistry. As Marina Warner observes in *Phantasmagoria*:

A shadow, preserved on paper, acted as an epitome of the subject's character. For all their schematic stillness, silhouettes can present the liveliest studies of family groups and friends [...] The blackness, emptiness, and simplicity demand work, but as if by miracle, the shadow figures appear to possess clear features: the shade summons the person.¹⁰

Like the silhouette, the doll's house is a miniaturised, still, imperfect form of reproduction. Although minutely modelled either in 1:12 or in 1:24 scale, the actual dimensions of the doll's houses' furnishings are rarely consistent with such scales. As these little objects are often produced with the same materials as the ones used in full-scaled domestic settings, in a doll's house, the fabric of the curtain is bound to look stiffer than normal, the chandelier is prone to appear oversized, and the veins of the timber are unlikely to fit the tiny floor of the living room. Instead of corroborating with the doll's house's desired lifelike effect, these over-detailed fabrications end by sabotaging its aspiration to realism. Yet, as Warner suggests, it is precisely this condition of imperfection that makes an artefact like the silhouette portrait meaningful. 'The very absences and inadequacies' of the profile, she writes, 'creates psychological space'.¹¹

The Silhouette Dining Box constituted an attempt to incorporate the idea of incompleteness that is inherent to reproducing practices to the process of design (Figure 7). Accordingly, in the doll's house in which the design is represented, only one quarter of the space is real: the rest is mirror reflection, illusion. In Warner's understanding, silhouettes have a spectral condition

Opposite
Figure 7: Silhouette Dining Box, by Ana Araujo.

in that they evoke absence through the presence of a double. In doing so, she states, they communicate a sense of mystery, affection, and intimacy. Doll's houses have a similar effect. As such, we believe, they might incite the production of mysterious, affectionate, intimate interiors.

CONCLUSION

In its diminutive scale as well as in its representational status, the doll's house resembles architectural models: the entities that, for some, if not all designers, constitute the very essence of architectural practice. Nonetheless, we hope we have argued here that the doll's house goes beyond the architectural model, providing both a critical and productive tool that is specific to the practice of interior design rather than architecture.

As a critical tool, we highlighted its ability to model occupation and practice rather than form, to privilege the interior over the exterior, and, perhaps most significantly, by inviting the audience's interaction we suggest that the doll's house challenges the designer's primacy over the interior space. As a productive tool or way of making, we explored the doll's house's ability to engage found objects, relating to the interior practice of operating with existing objects and within an existing context. We also noted the doll's house inclination towards the traditional and the craft-based techniques that both question architectural notions of originality and allow for a fresh undertaking of the conventional and the familiar.

In summation, we believe the employment of the doll's house as a critical and productive tool for the practice of interiors holds the promise to reinvigorate this practice, conferring on it a renewed identity that helps reinforce its independence from architecture. With this independence secured, the practice of interiors may in turn challenge some accepted routines in architecture, and here again the doll's house may play a significant role.

NOTES

1. As pointed out by Jonathan Hill, *Immaterial Architecture*, (London: Routledge, 2006) 33.
2. Charles Rice, *The Emergence of the Interior* (London: Routledge, 2006).
3. Catherine Bornet, *Dolls' Houses: a History of Domestic Life, Architecture and Design in Miniature*. (London: V&A, 2007).
4. John Berger, *And Our Faces, My heart, Brief as Photos*, (London: Writers and Readers, 1984) 64.
5. The problematic around authorship in spatial design and the role of the user is discussed in detail in Hill, J. (ed.), *Occupying Architecture: Between the Architect and the User* (London: Routledge, 1998).
6. Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1984) 61. See also Tabor, P. Striking Home: the Telematic Assault on Identity. In Hill, J. (ed.), *Immaterial Architecture*.
7. Stewart, *On Longing*, 61.
8. Stewart, *On Longing*, 44.

9. Stewart, *On Longing*, 58.
10. Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors, and Media into the Twenty-first Century*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 160-162.
11. Warner, *Phantasmagoria*, 161.

The authors gratefully acknowledge the participation of Mami Sayo and Helen Warren in the fabrication of the Secret House, and the participation of Pooja Asher, Erica Calogero, Ana Matic, Sagit Yakutieli and Jenny Wynness in the fabrication of the Knitted House.