

reading room / writing room  
interior design as  
critical comment  
mark taylor

## Introduction

This paper discusses a final year course in which students were invited to discuss design through reading, writing and making. The course had two main goals — research and critical reflection. During the course students studied 'closely associated' words to determine meaning in order to parallel their use in other disciplines. The chosen words focussed on the notion/act of adding-to, embellishing, or inserting into/onto existing conditions. Since the words were researched through disciplines other than interior and architecture, new meanings or interpretations helped formulate architectural propositions about space, surface, form, etc., thus extending our knowledge and understanding of design.

A design project ran parallel to the research and writing. Sited in an institutional organisation — the School of Architecture Library — the project critiqued the way this type of architecture promotes universal values above individuality and difference. For the project, the library as an institutional instrument and existing interior space was examined and critiqued from several perspectives, including feminist, gendered, cultural, and architectural. The purpose was to draw out ways in which the library is perceived and utilised from different perspectives, and to transpose these into propositions about library, architecture and the interior that accommodate individuality and difference. It is not a matter of redesigning for changing institutional needs — the institution as a body and physical manifestation was critiqued and reflected upon in relation to identity and changing cultural values.

Design proposals were brought into the library via the words/concepts already researched, as a process of adding-to, embellishing, or inserting into/onto a set of existing conditions. Their purpose was not to replace the existing library but to act as critical commentary, and to this extent were, in some cases, relatively small. The words/concepts and course readings for these assignments dealt with aspects of adding to an existing body through such things as surface marking, implanting, grafting and patching —







questioning how such aspects can be regarded as legitimate and of value. Several key texts on bodies, surface and marking were used to facilitate discussion beyond conventional interior discourse. Elizabeth Grosz's text *Volatile Bodies* on the body as an inscriptive surface, figures prominently. These texts offered insights into such things as alienation, spatial adornment and humility in an effort to rethink the interior.

Seminars were used to discuss various texts, and explore ways that the interior affects and is affected by people and situations. To assist this and further remove the 'object' nature of architecture, the interior was discussed as a system of representation that is constructed, experienced and understood, rather than through formal 'architectonic' terms. It was also experienced through such things as drawing, photography and literature, and included construction and design invention. At its margins were such things as gender and spatial privileging. In this exchange we found that issues such as gender and sexuality were explored, intending to determine how patriarchy and the question of gender and sexuality have been inscribed within architectural space.

Rooms were considered and re-positioned by addressing existing spatial and organisational conditions in a critical manner. For example a Marxist and/or feminist reading of a room offered different perspectives to both the physical space, and associated cultural, political, societal and functional aspects of its meaning and arrangement. Accordingly in the project the need to modify was made in relation to an imposed institutional understanding of spatial occupation, arrangement and encounter, rather than by changing use or

left - katrina rivers. home invasion



function. To some extent the design process was a subtle, internal or internalised, almost subversive act of reinterpretation.

### Course content(ious)

The course included one inter-year assignment, one written assignment and one studio-based assignment. The written and studio assignments were closely related, thus facilitating debate on the interior, in an open, edifying manner. Both these assignments were run in parallel, the intention being to generate an informative process between research and design, whilst providing more space/Raum/room for reading and thinking. Two staff members were involved with each assignment.

#### *Assignment One: Place Maps*

A vertically integrated group/individual assignment provided a venue for *seemingly* peripheral discussion that engaged the debate surrounding the interior. Its intention was to broaden an awareness of the marks and traces we construct and leave behind when engaging interiors. Each group visited *Te Papa/Our Place*, with a view to map/record our place.

Duration: two weeks.

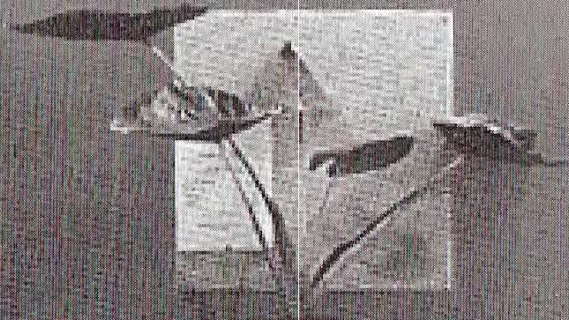
#### *Assignment Two: Writing Room*

This assignment provided a platform for widening horizons through roaming text and engaging in unfamiliar conversations. As an investigative process it allowed for a critical evaluation of the words and concepts often employed in design and architecture, by researching their meanings and use in other disciplines. It called for writing on a surface, perhaps as a small 'book' or series of markings, on one of the given or approved words/concepts. A minimum of two students were assigned to each 'word/concept' on the list to enable wider research and livelier discussion.



# Library

Te Pataka Horero



After Hours  
Book Returns





For this assignment 'design' was not seen as 'subject-centred' but part of a wider, loose series of interconnections, emerging as a peripheral activity in other disciplines. It encouraged a move beyond the design disciplinary matrix, in an effort to engage the conversation of others, seeking new ways of *seeing something* and *saying something*. In such a move there was an engagement with the unfamiliar, and researching in unfamiliar 'languages' of philosophy, gender studies, sociology, critical and cultural theory, literary criticism, psychology, medicine, cosmetics, dentistry, beauty therapy, sewing, gardening and furniture repair. However, though some texts in these areas are written in difficult or unfamiliar language, engaging with the 'jargon' was necessary for taking part and keeping the conversation alive. In all cases the 'word/concept' needed to return to a rethinking of the interior, though the degree to which this was done was open. Duration: seven weeks at one session per week.

The following group of words/concepts were chosen because they are concerned with marking an existing body. Many have close associations with the decorative/craft aspects of interior design:

*Surface Marking, Bruise, Inscription, Decoration, Tattoo, Ornament, Adornment, Embellishment, Embroider, Patch, Replication, Appliqué, Implant, Tuck, Insertion, Graft, Root, Fold, Rhizome, Palimpsest, Gloss, Inscription...*

Submission requirements:

Verbal and visual seminar presentation of research

Written submission of 1500-2000 words — open format

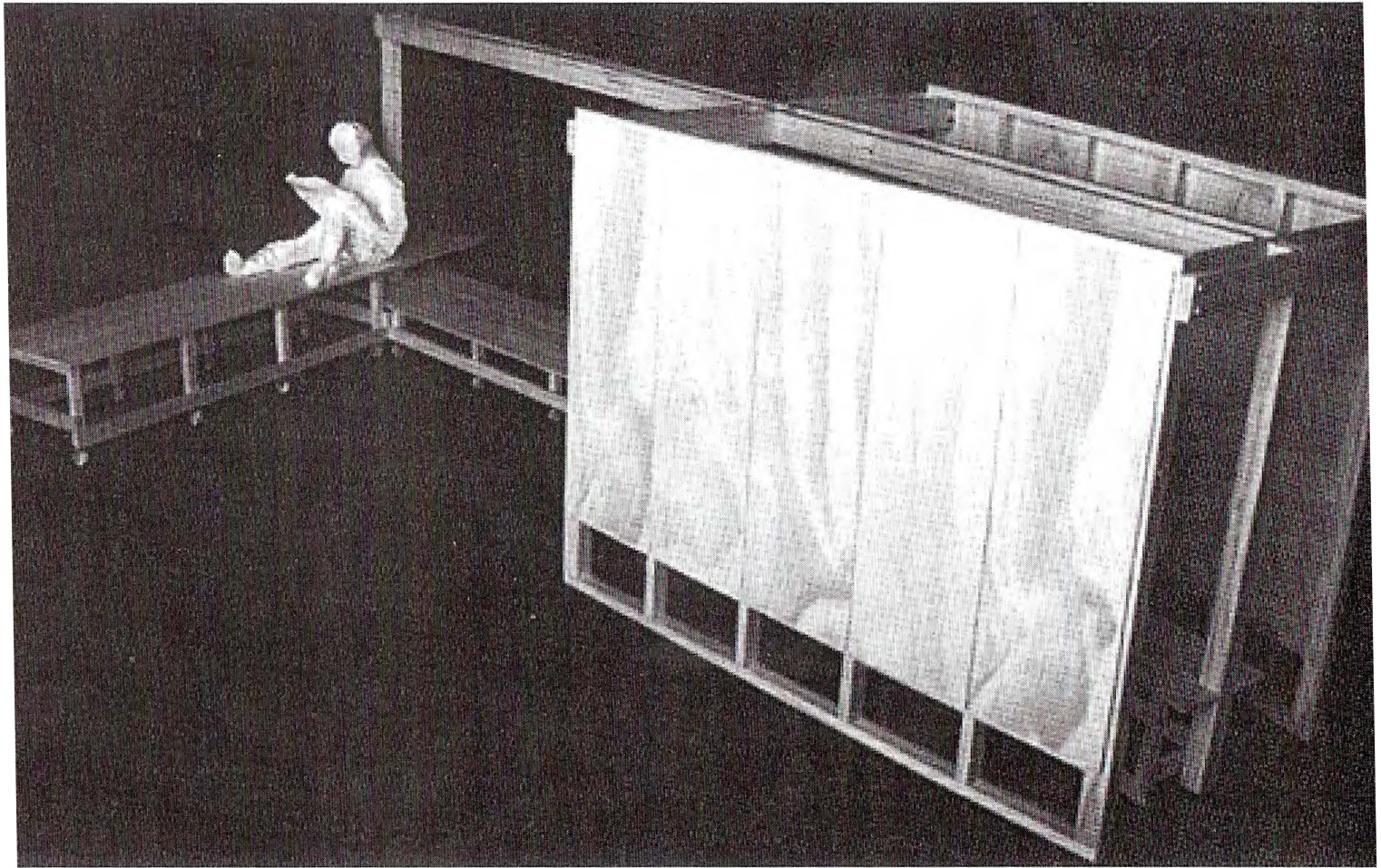
### *Assignment Three Reading Room*

This assignment questioned interior spaces that deny the familiar and social aspects of place and the individual, for the sake of highlighting universality and rational organisation. One such space is the institutional library, which can be 'read' as an abstract space for occupation, determined by a utilitarian, universal ordering and governance over the individual. For example, it provides one arrangement for reading and study, namely hard











surface table and chair; it provides controlled 'economic' book shelving, with little space for browsing and lounging; and it has gendered spatial and material hierarchies.

The project title *Reading Room* indicates that one is free to offer a reading of 'room' and/or 'the room,' as well as respond to the act of 'reading' and/or a 'reading space(Raum).' In all cases the reading had to be made in relation to the self. Using any theories, criticisms and other texts, students constructed a critical position prior to and alongside their design proposal. The proposal provided a parallel position and added to the complexity of the library. It was expected that the proposal draw upon the readings and research undertaken in Assignment Two — *Writing Room*.

There was no programme or brief in the conventional sense, but students were invited to respond to physical and social/psychological concerns using their design skills in order to orchestrate the space in relation to the action, processes or outcomes of 'reading.' As such it reduced programmatic issues to a minimum while elevating more tectonic and theoretical considerations. Large scale modelling was essential to allow the complexities of a seemingly simple proposal to be fully explored and developed in relation to idea and physical location.

Duration eight weeks at one session per week, plus two weeks model building.

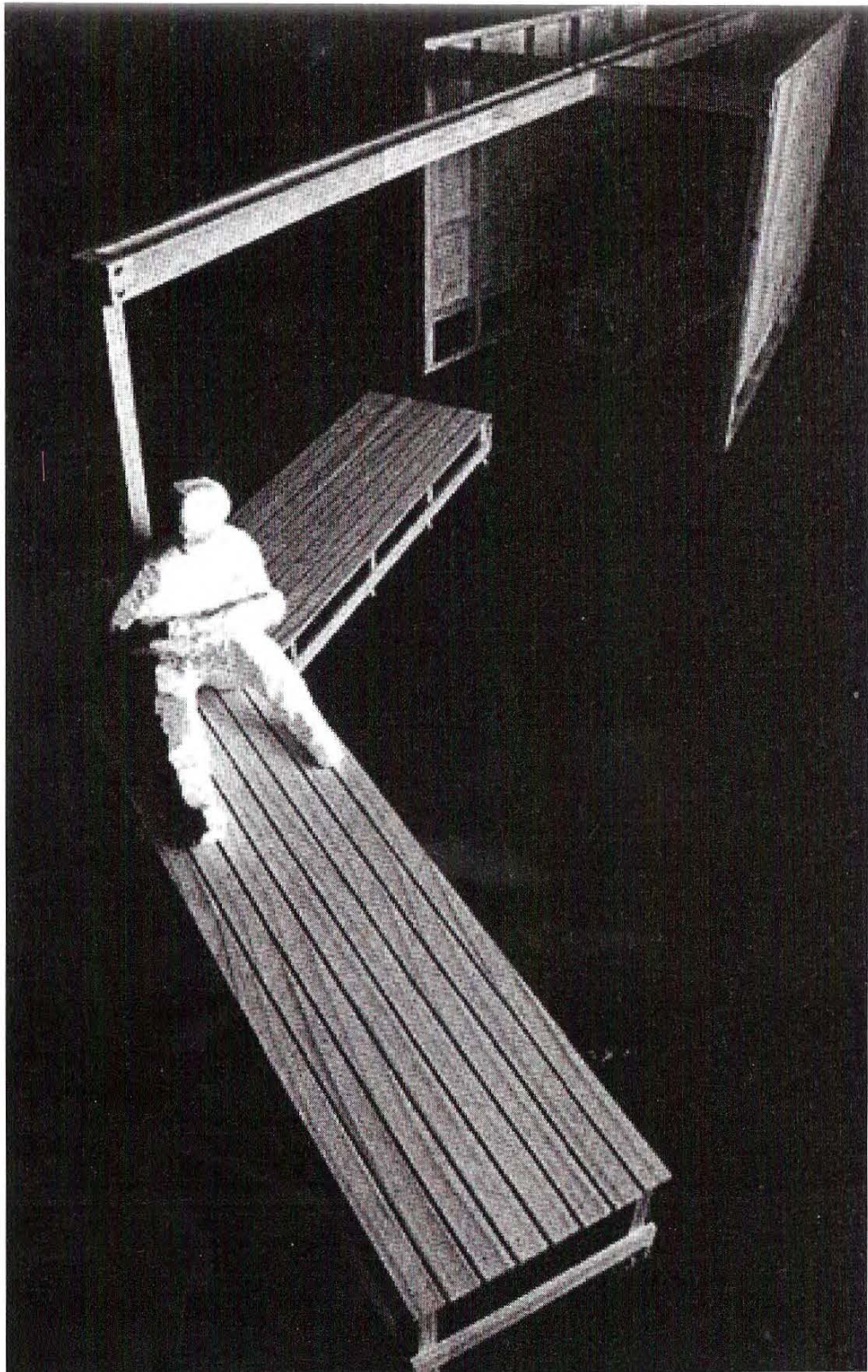
### Submission requirements

Presentation drawings at an appropriate scale such as 1:20, 1:5 or 1:1.

Models has to be large scale either 1:20 or 1:5, or a full size mock-up in the library.

left - ann clements. reading space





## Remaking and remarking

*Katrina Rivers, Home Invasion*

*(Full size installation by Katrina Rivers)*

This work critically challenges our preconceptions of an institutionalised interior by introducing domestic familiarity into a situation in which the interior architecture is read as having masculine traits. In referring to such things as the 'Cult of Domesticity', the domestic interior as a site of women's occupation and fabrication, is re-placed into a male-centred environment. Whether regarded as dressing-up or cross-dressing, this work transforms the space, by overlaying or overwriting as exemplified in a palimpsestic process (as researched for *Assignment Two*). However, its location — a threshold — is important, since it is the point of change, the place where one moves from one state to another. Each visitor entering and leaving engages with the work and is subsequently confronted with/by issues of gender and architecture/interior. When the large-scale curtain draws back to reveal the existing door as a Jacobean lead-light window, it reflects a 'comfortable home' image popular amongst home developers. But, the mis-aligned 'lead work' throws a challenge to convention and certainty.

*Ann Clements, Reading Space*

*(1:5 model by Amy Anderson, Juliet Cooke, Bihua Fu, Karen Henning-Hansen)*

Initiated by researching what constitutes 'reading', studying both how and where it occurs traditionally and contemporarily, this proposal questions and rethinks the whole library through the actions and circumstances of reading. In response to differing cultural perspectives on reading, it proposes that the practice of reading could be thought of as not a singular, isolated, and quiet experience, but as a multiplicitous activity including oral traditions and public shared debate. Formal organization comes under scrutiny as the work sets up an 'accidental' relationship with the library. That is, it appears as an ambiguous fragment of other occasions such as park bench, changing room, school hall and garden shed. Though the

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design initially worked with the idea of embellishment (as researched in *Assignment Two*), the final proposal moved beyond the existing furniture to introduce its own. The final proposal has an informal, almost sculptural (in an artistic sense) quality. Drawing heavily on ideas of humility and ambiguity, it presents a series of disturbing, (un)comfortable places to read to oneself or a gathering, within or without the enclosure.

### Conclusion

Although the project appeared complex and to some extent seemed to 'direct' the student work, the outcomes exhibited a wide range of responses. They were different not only as a result of individual taste and preference, but also as a result of the numerous combinations of words/concepts and individual interpretations. This factor is important, for it provided open thinking, thus encouraging students to question *theoria* and *praxis* in relation to their own work. Although their initial reaction was cause for concern, the students met the assignments with enthusiasm, perhaps due to an identification with the library as a familiar place for study. In attempting to bring an individuality into the research, many began by thinking of their personal preferences for a reading space, rather than critically reading the existing room. Many students were less inclined to sit and read in the library at a desk and on a table, preferring to read in other spaces. These included the bath, bed and backyard, indicating a need to be surrounded by a familiar, softer form of architecture/interior, which was often brought into their work through fabrics and other woven materials.

What the project indicated is that interior design can take a critical position on an existing room and the institution of room, both through analyses and design. By making slight changes architecture becomes the site for political action. Each differing perspective exposes how the existing space conforms to a global ideology on disposition and arrangement, supported by a modernist architectural ideology. The fact that it prescribes one

arrangement for reading and study, namely open plan/hard surface table and upright chairs, precludes other culturally based forms of study. By reading the library in this manner, and offering another perspective through an architectural proposition, the existing library's stasis is brought into question.

### References

1. Grosz, E., (1994). *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism*, Allen and Unwin., St. Leonards. pp138-159
2. Colomina, Beatriz (ed), (1992). *Sexuality and Space*, Princeton Architectural Press, Princeton
3. This project recently received an award from *Object* magazine, '99 *Object* Magazine Awards, *Object*, Centre for Contemporary Craft, Sydney, Issue 1/2000, pp 68-69
4. This work drew upon the thoughts and ideas of Siah Armanjani, S., (1995). *Reading Spaces*, *Libres de Recerca*, I, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona.