

# Unsolicited Interiors

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## ABSTRACT

*Developed from a contemporary theory lecture regarding economic realities and guerilla practice, the studio Unsolicited Interiors proposes political engagement as a critical operation of interior architecture agency via the exploration of contested urban volumes, unsolicited intervention and choreographic occupation. A text and image review of this studio considers student response to political texts, design speculation, and public space disruptions through performance, photography, large-scale model-making and self-initiated actions. Discussion of a series of collaborative interventions with visiting Berlin-based collective raumlabor reinforces a positioning of design activism through acts of provocation and social inquiry as critical to spatial decisions in, and of, the city.*

## INTRODUCTION

Despite volatile financial factors affecting the profession of interior architecture, few alternative modes of practice are discussed which enable students to participate within a wider political economy that largely determines how, where and why we work. This paper reviews a recent interior architecture studio that positioned political intent and active engagement with the city as the means for foregrounding these strategies. The studio proposed that self-initiated interventions could identify new design processes for students – shifting from form making towards contextual analysis, social inquiry and other concerns of spatial agency. This paper aims to establish that an engaged interior architecture studio pedagogy demands an actively provocative practice – beyond brief-led studio exercises to include interdisciplinary collaboration, ongoing critical processes and disruptive actions, which question our personal relationships to, direct engagement with, and everyday decisions made in the city.

This paper discusses a third year design studio – *Unsolicited Interiors* – run as part of Monash University's undergraduate interior architecture program. The studio worked to uncover disputed public spaces in the city and reconnect the interior to urban public space through student-initiated interventions. The formulation of the studio framework owes a debt to *Volume's* exploration of unsolicited architecture<sup>1</sup> and Hyde's research regarding self-initiated projects at the traditional edges of practice.<sup>2</sup> The Berlin-based urban collective *raumlabor* also acted as precedent for both pedagogical context and spatial practice, with members visiting to engage with students via lectures and workshops, and ascertaining the integrity of proposed student work through formal design critiques and informal discussion.

With a small group of 15 students and one tutor, the studio was taught over a 13-week period in 2013. Comprising debates, weekly activities and guest lectures, *Unsolicited Interiors* sought to move beyond typical studio delivery formats with collaborative and trans-disciplinary performative actions involving visiting

practitioners, temporarily occupying city infrastructure, bartering for temporary use of city-based creative spaces, and testing 1:1 scale prototypes to explore, map and analyse the experiences of the city. Twice during the semester, faculty members, student peers and additional external critics were invited to respond to the work created by students, in formal presentation sessions.

Interdisciplinary critiques were also held in city streets and laneway bars appropriated during the course of the studio. Indeed, the declared role of the studio was reiterated throughout all the semester's activities – that in order to critique the city, learning, questioning and engagement must occur from, and within, the city streets.<sup>3</sup>

## THE STUDIO AS SPATIAL AGENCY

Studio investigations developed from a contemporary theory lecture given in the previous semester titled *Guerrilla Economy*, which generated an unexpected volume of student response. The lecture reviewed economic recession, notions of austerity, socially constructed design values, critiqued methods of inquiry sanctioned by dominating political agendas and addressed guerrilla design practice as a new and potentially confronting mode of operation for many students. They were asked to respond directly to the provocation: *faced with a downturn in the global economy and also the local construction industry, what are the controversial, experimental and self-initiated projects that can enable excluded practitioners (like ourselves) to reclaim position, power and even territory within tightly-held or increasingly-privatised spaces?* For students of interior architecture not previously exposed to ideas of alternative spatial practice or tactical urbanism, the lecture provoked deep questioning and for many, the first recognition of social and political responsibilities in their development as designers. By giving students the chance to consider these concerns in the studio environment, real and contemporary conditions could be explored through the development of their own spatial practice.

Awan, Schneider & Till argue that new methods of spatial agency are required to short-circuit the continued experience of design practitioners as 'impotent passengers on the rollercoaster of

boom and bust cycles'.<sup>4</sup> This studio also declared 'agency' as a primary concern, encouraging students to abandon passive roles within the economic cycle and to actively pursue self-initiated projects as an alternative mode of operation. The studio sought to apply this provocation within the Melbourne CBD, emphasising the agency of the urban interior to confront socio-political expectations and deprivations, and to create targeted modes of action previously unimagined or unsupported by vested interests in the city.

A key qualification of the term agency was made for students: *even when we are working as an individual we are never working alone.* This underscored the challenge that personal agency and societal norms tend to operate as tangled oppositions,<sup>5</sup> open to multiple interpretations. Expanding the notion of interior 'volume' to include broad social content, the studio aimed to reduce a dependency on form-making aesthetics and object fetishism in undergraduate design processes as methods inadequate to negotiate complex networks of built form, occupied space and lived experience.<sup>6</sup> Focusing on the production of space as inherently temporal and political in action,<sup>7</sup> the studio asked students to consider ongoing interventions and disruptions within the interiority of their city. Acts of provocation were seen as critical – both embedded in the pedagogy to disrupt student design process norms, and as a means by which students could initiate dialogue(s) with spaces and occupants of the city.

## THE STUDIO FRAMEWORK

The *Unsolicited Interiors* studio was divided into six projects outlined in Table 1, with new work iteratively responding to prior actions. Each project was framed by a series of spatial strategies (mapping, precedent projects, physical model-making, diagramming, drawing, choreographed actions), supporting resources (radical texts, guest lectures, design activism blogs, recorded lectures, films) and design experiences (workshops, material sourcing, interdisciplinary collaboration, public interventions, large-scale prototyping) to reveal the many alternative strategies available to address engagement and self-initiated design action.

Table 1: *Unsolicited Interiors* studio outline

Project	Critical Operations of Urban Engagement	Spatial Strategies	Project Scope
<i>Urban Mapping + Urban Projection</i> (1 week)	Examination of existing urban conditions, comparative studies of precedent projects, and methods of documenting contested sites.	Introduction to peers, researching historical records, mapping volumetric experiences, collaborative networks.	As a studio-wide group, prepare a detailed collage plan of city sites in context, then in small groups collage specific precedent projects onto the map as a scaled comparison of spatial practices.
<i>Unsolicited Interior as Speculation</i> (2 weeks)	Interior qualities of urban volumes and spatial intervention. Theories of design activism and socio-political critique.	Documentation of speculative action and experience, physical model-making from found material sources.	Individually proposed intervention within a city site in response to researched context, personal experience and critique of current mode/s of occupation.
<i>A Phase of Engagement</i> (3 weeks)	Processes of city-based engagement and collaboration. The performative nature of interior experiences. Theories of civic rights and guerilla urbanism.	Negotiation with peers, diagramming of behaviours, design of thresholds and temporal activities.	Reconfigure previous proposal as an individually performed intervention, and in dynamic response to two other student proposals.
<i>Interior Re-Enact</i> (1 week)	1:1 scale testing of physical interventions. Theories of micro-territories, narrative and the city.	Prototyping, time-based documentation, civic engagement.	Performed actions from individual projects within the streets of the city, concealed within a 1:1 prototype of each student's intervention and documentation of passers-by responses using guerilla filmmaking techniques.
<i>Occupy!</i> (1 week)	Practiced disruption of urban behaviours. Interrogation of techniques of public intervention.	Urban intervention, sourcing of found materials, testing of performative actions, group negotiations.	Claim the personal within public space, map/document the effect of the intervention, absorb the feedback from passers-by and reconfigure the group's interruption of the public realm.
<i>Self-initiated Sites of Prolonged Action</i> (5 weeks)	Contested urban spaces, movement of bodies through the city, detailed exploration of physical intervention, material specifications, presentation and communication.	Iterative design processes, developing brief from detailed testing of actions, critique of modes of production (drawing, diagramming, physical model-making, choreographic representation), detailed refinement of physical proposals.	In response to initial proposal, propose additional urban intervention in new location and choreograph the ongoing interior experiences of both sites.

## SPECULATIONS AND INTERVENTIONS

This discussion examines three student works produced as part of the final project *Self-initiated Sites of Prolonged Action* – and includes individual student responses and group collaboration beyond the confines of studio. During this project, students worked to reconfigure their earlier proposal and discover a new site for intervention to create a dual urban interior engagement – that is, a choreographed and ongoing critique of the Melbourne CBD.

Critical operations of spatial agency were self-directed by individual students, interrogated by the tutor and student peers, and based on research of city context and spatial practice tested through diagramming, drawing, filmed performance and physical model-making. The basis of the studio's concerns was that the dual interventions be considered as a choreographed interior experience to enable a wider positive engagement with the city. In designing the final project, the students were required to prolong and expand their original proposals for an unsolicited urban interior, detail the lived experience of that interiority, register the bodily movements within and between each of their spaces, and negotiate the politics of such an ongoing provocation in the city.

Hinkel suggests that informal exploration of interactions, perceptions and changing relationships located in and between public spaces can reveal the urban interior that we occupy as a contested experience.<sup>8</sup> Informal critiques in the studio reiterated design strategies geared less towards the aesthetic qualities or physical form of urban environments, and more towards the 'practiced place of space'.<sup>9</sup> Emphasis was placed on the production of interior architecture within the city as an intermediary zone: 'not an object, not a closed-off final condition, but performative and process-based...an ongoing improvisation and action'.<sup>10</sup>

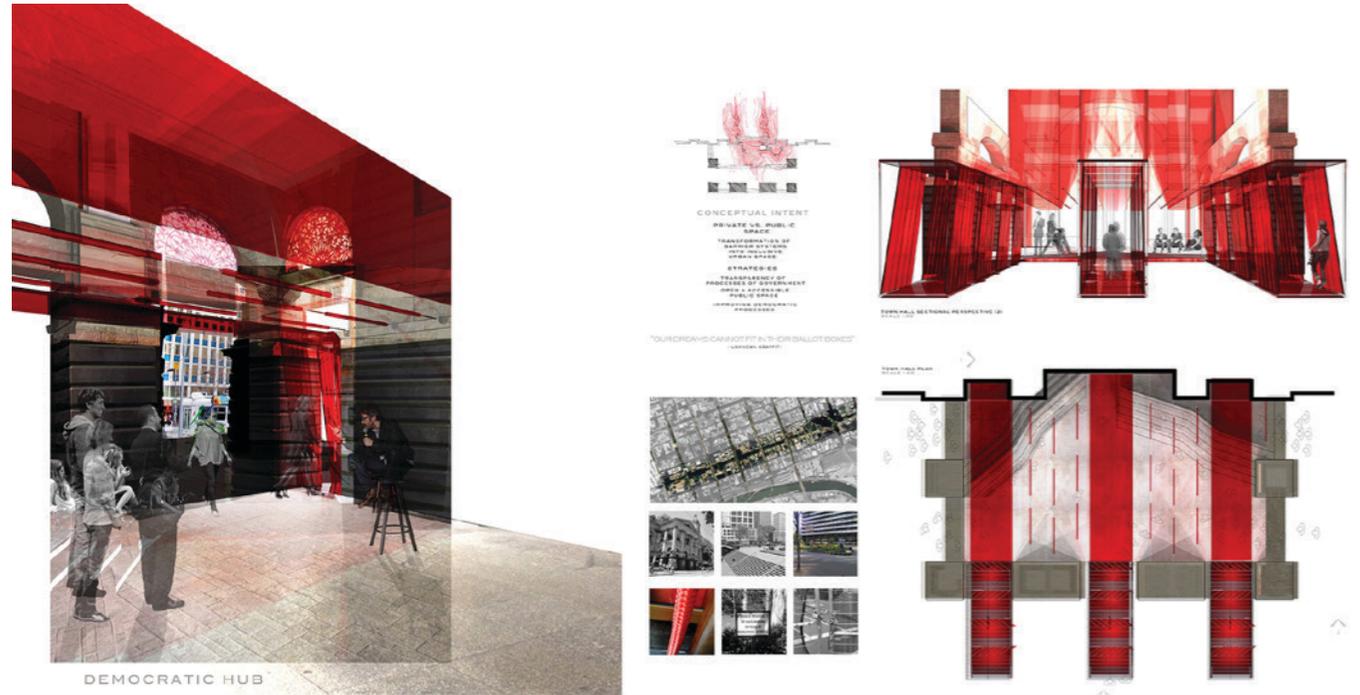
The *Self-initiated Sites of Prolonged Action* project allowed students to develop time-based manoeuvres – integrating current and future alternative uses of the Melbourne CBD via their own experiences in the urban field. The studio concerned itself with providing students with interdisciplinary tools to uncover a project in some ways already in progress in the city, and then to provocatively intervene in this situation.

## DEMOCRATIC HUB

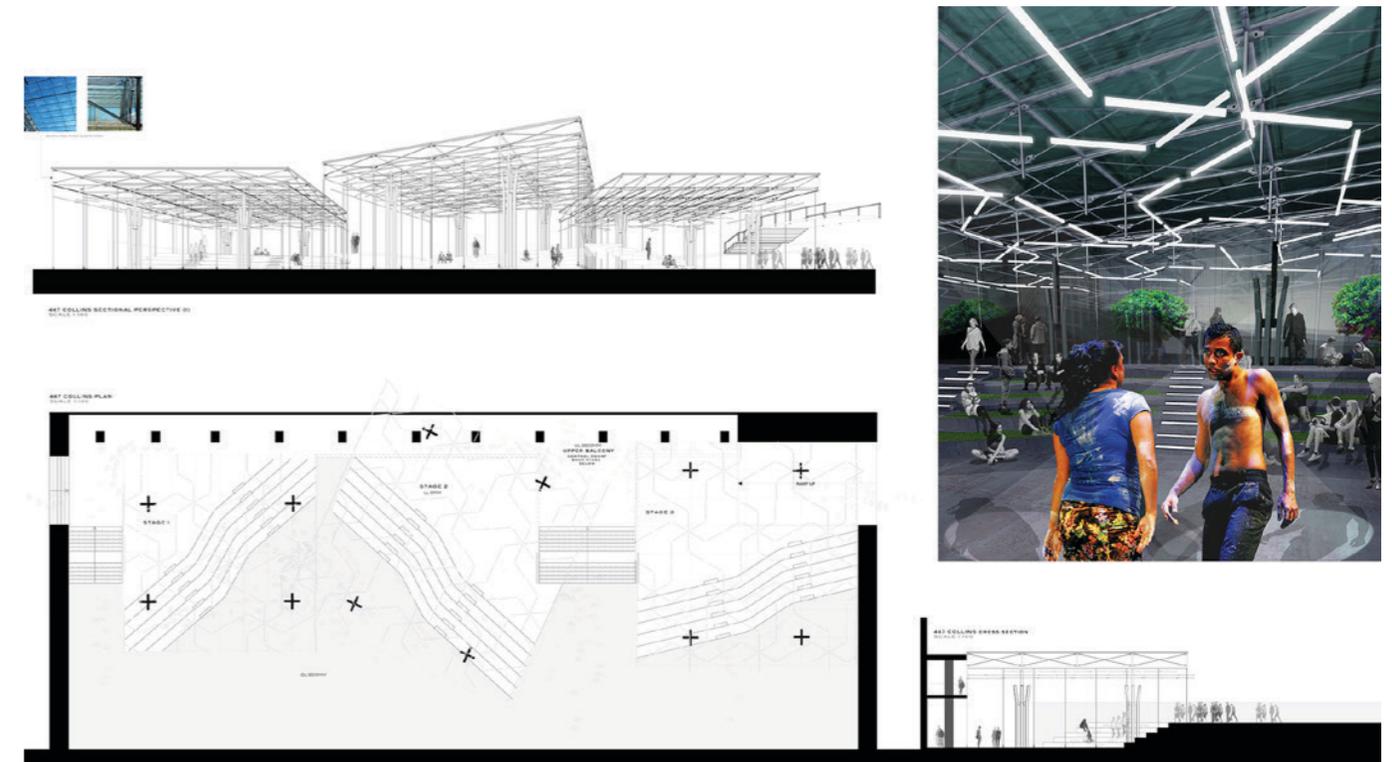
This design speaks to barely-registered structures of exclusion within the democratic city and the public reveal of political processes of urban experience. The student's research uncovered Governor George Gipps' dismissal of public squares planned in early 19th century Melbourne to prevent the popular thrall of democracy. This historical trigger led to a series of mappings, all underscoring the use of red braided ropes as a method of control in important urban centres. Drawing on the loaded imagery and materiality of glossy red ropes, the student worked to invert these assumed symbols of power and create new public gathering spaces and council chambers

within the Swanston Street portico of the Melbourne Town Hall – saturating the experience of arrival into these spaces through multiple translucent thresholds, at once threaded together, tactile, brashly red and radical in identity.

Mozas states that 'public space reflects the wishes and desires of the public which creates it. These aspirations give content to the space where human representation takes place'.<sup>11</sup> By building on memories of recent public protest and historical references to political action in the streets of Melbourne, the student elected to return civic functions of the Town Hall to the street and created an accessible terrain of provocation within this newly captured public interior – platforms, ramped walkways and plinths for expanded public assembly and community discussion groups, while the usual thoroughfare through the classical columns of the portico on Swanston Street was maintained, so that unexpected collisions between speakers, activists, community members, councillors and passers-by could create spontaneous engagement with the now openly democratic politics of urban governance.



The student paired this intervention with a soon-to-be-demolished modernist office block and public concourse in the financial district of Collins Street – offering a space of political performance and entertainment to the city. Creating a loosely terraced landscape of audience and performer spaces beneath a high-level rigging system integrated with an open steel structure and oversized light fittings, this alternative democratic hub focused on the provision of space for other voices and narratives within the tightly controlled corporate precinct. Incorporating the features of braided rope structures into the layout of lighting and audio amplification systems, the student sought to co-opt assumed power structures and develop a performance-ready interior within a familiar urban volume, without dictating the ultimate programming of the space. As Mozas notes, design strategies such as these support Koolhaas' notion of specific indeterminacy in the city<sup>12</sup> – 'specific to this location and indeterminate due to the fact that the plan of action is not implemented according to pre-set values'.<sup>13</sup>



Opposite  
Figure 1: Democratic Hub – Melbourne Town Hall, Tess Carpenter, 2013.

Above  
Figure 2: Democratic Hub – Collins Street, Tess Carpenter, 2013.

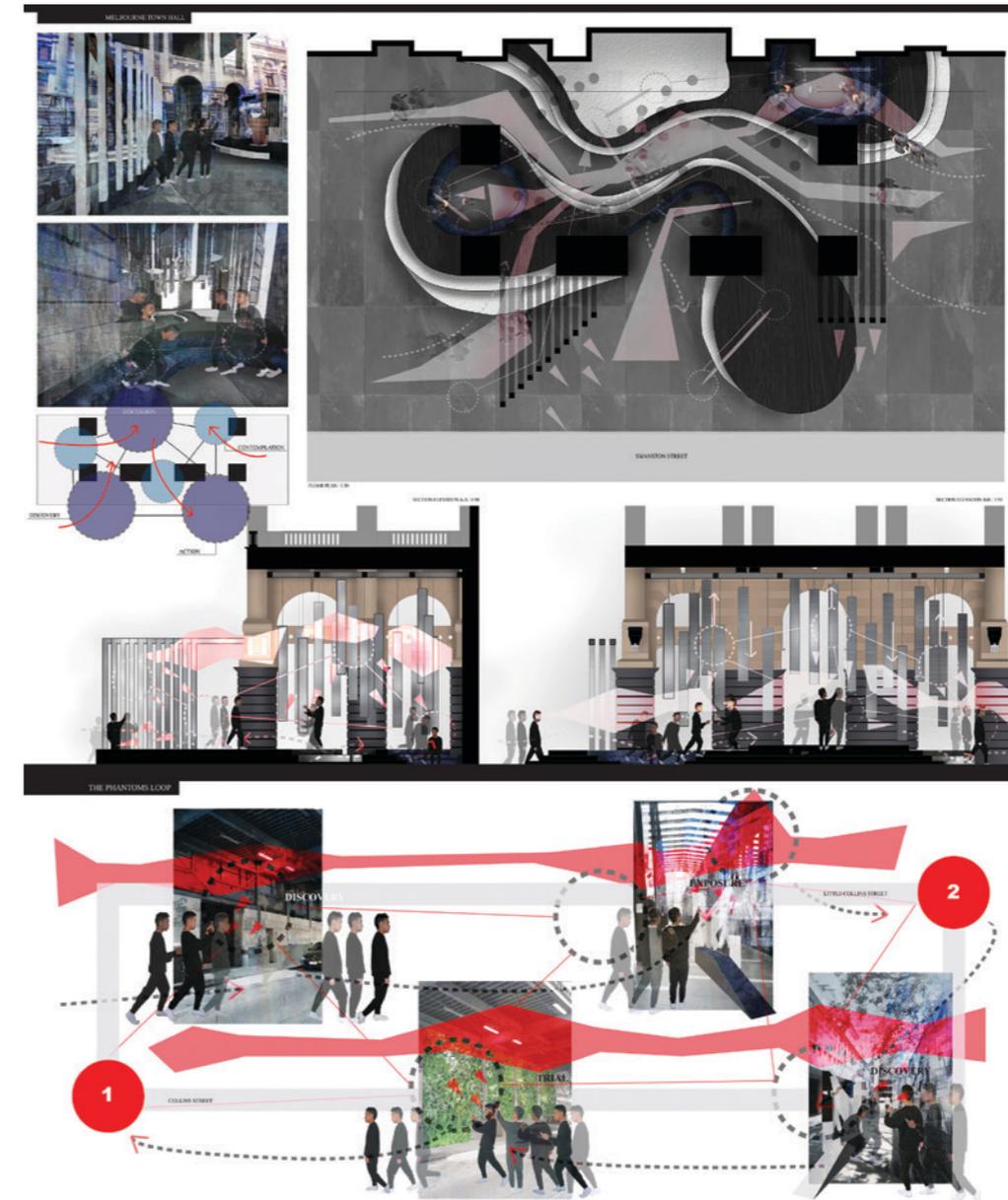
Linking the two democratic hubs through the CBD, the student also choreographed a suite of digital incursions into laneways, tram stops and other thoroughfares – alerting occupants of the city to political decision-making events and new public narratives staged in co-opted urban spaces.

## THE PHANTOM AND THE LABYRINTH

The focus for this design was an ongoing loop of operations in the city, conceived to change over time in response to occupants' personal critiques. To enable rewriting of the city, the student created a scaffold of unexpected spaces and public behaviours, mediated via immersive engagement in the continued churn of the Melbourne CBD. Functioning day and night, and registered through social media platforms, this design aimed to address notions of the civic realm and urban development, and how these concerns are communicated to and between everyday occupants. The design linked interventions that privileged strategy and awareness above detailed interior environments. And although initially reluctant to disband a focus on form making, the student eventually proposed a cyclical approach to issues prevalent in the selected urban sites. Recognising that meaningful change occurs in response to discovery, awareness and open discussion, the student established a process of trial, implementation, reflection and iterative action to resolve various blighted areas of the Melbourne CBD. Departing from a usual focus on finely crafted formal responses to a design brief, open-ended design strategies were explored and space provided for others to adapt the interventions to their own ends.

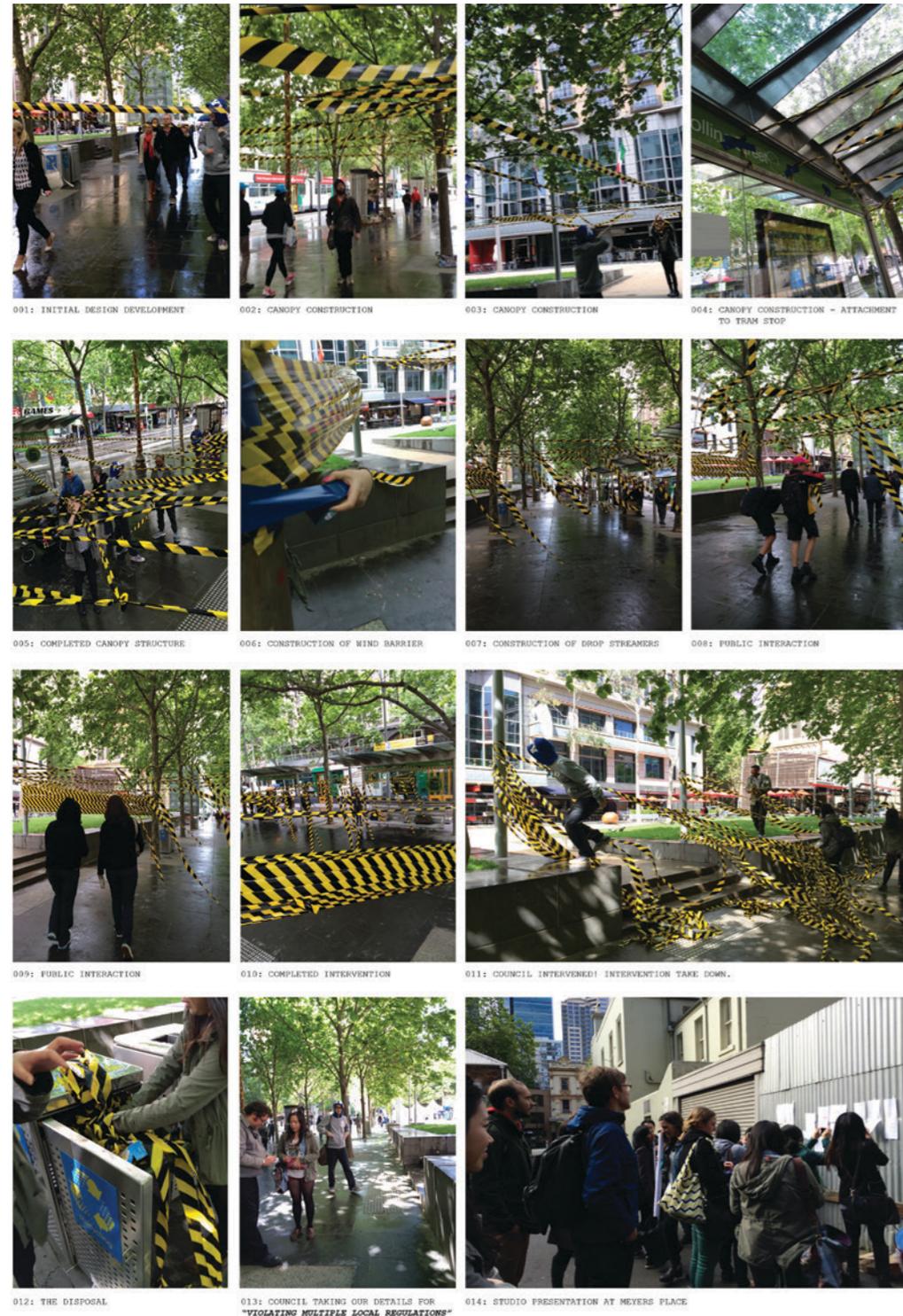
Two sites for intervention were initially approached independently, and framed as *The Phantom* (the Melbourne Town Hall portico) and *The Labyrinth* (a corporate laneway accessed from Collins Street and Little Collins Street). *The Phantom* identified civic qualities of the Town Hall – discussion, debate and community change – and reconfigured these within a slowly shifting cavern-like interior for public assembly created within the Swanston Street portico, bringing the idealised functions of the council chambers to the occupants of the city. *The Labyrinth* was conceived as a forum between two venerable gender-specific clubs – The Melbourne Club and The Lyceum Club – and to encourage new members to enter the ageing institutions and reconsider their relevance to contemporary urban experience.

After reflecting on the challenges of transdisciplinary group work, the student began to approach the dual interventions in a fundamentally different manner. The design responded to other projects in the studio and incorporated multiple interventions into its expanding sphere of influence. *The Phantom* – now, as strategy – detached from a specific site and networked with other locations through the city: shadowing occupants, registering their discoveries and dislikes, and streaming live video and digital experiences through a custom-made phone app to other occupants in the city. *The Labyrinth* similarly broke free from its physical form and emerged as the social relationship of the city itself – embedded with dualities, conflicts and spatial contests that are necessarily uncovered, discussed and negotiated by multiple individuals. The design is primarily interested in



the discovery and organisation of interior environments – physical interventions are simply part of a cycle and related to the city as an occupation, which is sensory, political, technological and experimental.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, *The Phantom* and *The Labyrinth* is a project that supports personal and collective activities that can immerse, diverge and radically alter the experience of public space.

Above  
Figure 3: The Phantom and The Labyrinth, Kieren Verdan, 2013.



## COLLABORATION BEYOND STUDIO – OCCUPY!

At the midpoint of their final projects, students also collaborated with visiting practitioners *raumlabor* to create urban interventions in multiple sites within the Melbourne CBD. By deliberately disrupting individual design process, the *Occupy!* workshop helped to cut across students' personal agendas. A public lecture of *raumlabor* projects and practice and Q&A session was given by Christof Mayer and Andreas Krauth, and students were assigned to trans-disciplinary groups tasked with sourcing specific domestic materials – plastic wrap, buckets and brooms, and hazard tape – for a series of actions. Groups were led to several city street locations with ambiguously delineated public and private zones, and asked to 'claim' a piece of personal space by identifying and then shifting the usual occupations of the public realm through 'domestic' actions of appropriation by utilising materials they had sourced. Students needed to consider how 'personal use' could operate as provocation within common spaces, select micro-sites for occupation, negotiate strategic intervention in the city, and to carefully question the aim of their act of occupation.

The students faced extreme (even for Melbourne) weather conditions, combative security guards, and varying degrees of public engagement during their interventions, and were obliged to carry out their spatial practice as a mode of inquiry – to question their own roles in the intervention, explain their intent to interested passers-by and creatively circumvent officious private security guards – in order to continue their ongoing interventions. Studio tutors and *raumlabor* also shadowed the groups during the interventions – alternating between providing peer support and design interrogation as required by the student actions. The performed interventions were mapped and documented through photography, filming and social media, and students conducted critique sessions with *raumlabor* by co-opting an unused delivery bay of a nearby laneway.

Initially Christof Mayer noted the reluctance of many students to transgress behavioural norms in the city, despite their eagerness to do so in a theoretical setting.<sup>15</sup> Andreas Krauth also questioned the motivation of some groups for their confronting interventions into public space, suggesting that action does not always need to be radically 'political' in a didactic sense to represent real change.<sup>16</sup> In response to this interim critique, groups relocated to alternate sites in the city, and repeatedly tested new actions with authentic engagement with passers-by. Provocations that employed game-playing techniques and cheery inclusion of others to occupy contested spaces often sidestepped any security presence, with guards unsure of how to respond to play-orientated rather than overtly political disruptions. More deliberately constructed interventions were however easily identified and ordered removed by security guards. Thus students began to address their own spatial agency and defend the public use of urban volumes in concert with the city and those who occupy it. By simply pursuing a claim of personal experience in public space the students recognised they were engaging in inherently everyday political actions that demanded a critique of how, why and by (and for) whom the city is regulated.

*Opposite*

Figure 4: Narrative documentation of student intervention in collaboration with *raumlabor*.  
Photomontage: Kieren Verdan, 2013.

## CONCLUSION

The *Unsolicited Interiors* studio declared interior architecture as a critical operation within the wider political economy of the city, and sought to expand design pedagogy through active disruption of both the urban fabric and student assumptions regarding their own spatial practice. The aim of the studio was to enable students to uncover and fully participate in a shifting, relational city with sometimes barely visible vested interests that direct normative, controlled environments. The studio included a wide spectrum of activities structured to produce unexpected effects upon the students and their occupation of urban interiors, at all times encouraging a culture of open critique, social inquiry, unsolicited actions and spatial agency.

As students worked through the performative and disruptive behaviours demanded by the actively provocative approach of the studio, many contextualised their own roles in design practice and recognised social and political responsibilities inherent in their development as designers. Students expanded their assumptions of spatial practice, identified their own lived experience in the city, and conceived alternative methods of engagement in the complex economic volatility that surrounds the profession of interior architecture.

Students were able to access new and challenging modes of operation within the supportive environment of the studio – deconstruction of radical texts, large-scale prototyping, collaboration with trans-disciplinary practitioners, negotiated group actions, peer debate and ongoing critique – but the real success of the semester lay in the profound changes to their own design practice.

Shifting attention from purely form-based responses within the design process, many students recognised the limits of an emphasis on aesthetics in their own decision-making. Though initially reluctant to depart from this mainstream practice, the ongoing events of the studio encouraged students to pursue provocation, public engagement and new methodologies of interior architecture practice that question the very urban environment we occupy – expanding the aims of the studio into their everyday lived experience.

## NOTES

1. Arjen Oosterman, ed., *Volume #14: Unsolicited Architecture* (Amsterdam: Archis Publishers, 2007). Based on the work of a design studio run by Ole Bouman at MIT.
2. Rory Hyde, *Future Practice: Conversations from the Edge of Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2013).
3. David Harvey, "Preface: Henri Lefebvre's Vision," in *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (London: Verso, 2013), xiii.
4. Nishat Awan, Tatjana Schneider and Jeremy Till, *Spatial Agency: Other Ways Of Doing Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2011), 28.
5. Discussion of Anthony Giddens' notions of 'agency' and action, in *Spatial Agency: Other Ways Of Doing Architecture*, by Nishat Awan, Tatjana Schneider and Jeremy Till, (London: Routledge, 2011), 31.

6. Awan et al, *Spatial Agency*, 28.
7. Awan et al, *Spatial Agency*, 30.
8. Rochus Urban Hinkel, "Private Encounters And Public Occupations: A Methodology For The Exploration Of Public Space," in *Urban Interior: Informal Explorations, Interventions And Occupations*, ed. Rochus Urban Hinkel, (Melbourne: Spurbuchverlag, 2011), 79.
9. Discussion of Michel Certeau's stance on space as a 'practiced place', in Hinkel, *Urban Interior*, 81.
10. Hinkel, *Urban Interior*, 86.
11. Javier Mozas, "Strategy And Tactics: Public Space As A Battlefield," in *A+T: Strategy And Tactics In Public Space 38* (2011): 16.
12. Rem Koolhaas, *SMLXL* (Köln: Taschen, 1998), 921.
13. Mozas, *A+T: Strategy And Tactics In Public Space*, 8.
14. Rochus Urban Hinkel, "Prelude," in *Urban Interior: Informal Explorations, Interventions And Occupations*, ed. Rochus Urban Hinkel, (Melbourne: Spurbuchverlag, 2011), 6.
15. Christof Mayer, *raumlabor*. Interview by author; Melbourne, October 17, 2013.
16. Andreas Krauth, *raumlabor*. Interview by author; Melbourne, October 17, 2013.