

Unbecoming

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This is a collection of stories about rooms, and people.

They are unbecoming stories, in which people don't behave as they should: a rude mechanical impersonates a wall; and Daedalus builds wings to escape the labyrinth of his own making. A little girl throws a tomato from a balcony in Bombay; and a New York decorator conducts kitchen wars. A young man wanders through an underground city; a building's wounds are bandaged; and an empty house attracts unpredictable neighbours. Clubbers have sex in a darkened basement; and an emperor builds a cathedral in the middle of a mosque. The forgotten contents of a store cupboard are taken out, and rearranged as art. Marie Antoinette locks herself into her boudoir.

She presses a button on the wall, and the windows are replaced with mirrors, excluding the uncertainties of the world, and replacing them with the perfection of her own reflection. Her interior is a room: an enclosed aesthetic system whose very enclosure represents a similarly bounded ethical conviction. Just as Alberti said of beauty, nothing more can be added, and nothing can be taken away, except for the worse. Designing interiors was the process, we used to say, of finding a place for everything, and putting everything in its place.

It was, as Fatima Pombo and Peter Aeschbacher write in this journal, a monstrous idea; and the image of the queen, endlessly reflected, could only provoke anxiety in its original. Even the desire for perfection is in itself unbecoming.

All of the stories contained here are about interiors that, along with their occupants, have ceased to be: they have unbecome. The wall is a moment in a play; and Icarus died trying to escape his father's labyrinth, with his father's wings strapped to his back. The rubbish that litters the pavements of Bombay was food in a kitchen once; and the decorator's apartment will be redecorated. The tunnels under Montreal are, thanks to their own extension, formless. The bandaged building was once an asylum for the sick. The house in Detroit was already abandoned: now it has been demolished. The darkroom in the basement was originally a power station; and the cathedral was, the Emperor later reflected, a mistake. The contents of the store cupboard were ritual instruments, once; and Marie Antoinette ...

When the revolutionaries dragged the Queen away from her boudoir, they left the door ajar, broke the locks, and smashed the mirrors, destroying the spatial and visual coherence of the room. They made it ugly – unbecoming. They did so in the name of liberty, for an enclosed room, in which everything has been considered, which dictates to its occupants exactly how it should be used, permits of no freedom; and freedom is what rooms that have unbecome afford their occupants. They are, in their specific interior way, ruins that, the geographer Tim Edensor writes:

can be explored for effects that talk back to the quest to create an impossibly seamless urban fabric, to the uses to which history and heritage are put, to the extensive over-commodification of places and things, to middle-class aesthetics, and to broader tendencies to fix meanings in the service of power.¹

The unbecoming interiors discussed in the essays collected here are experiments with liberty, or, at least, critiques of the monstrous desire designers sometimes have to design and to control everything. A wall enacted by an actor subverts the oppressive materiality of real walls with a gesture; and the tomato thrown over the balcony is a child's gesture of impatience with parents who throw nothing away. The decorator uses décor to subvert the architectonic order of his apartment; and recesses in the endless tunnels under Montreal provide a toehold for the homeless and the enterprising. The bandages wrapping the walls of the asylum provoke its inhabitants to discuss its future, and the very abandonment of the house in Detroit invites neighbours to consider new uses for it before it is taken away from them. There's nothing more exciting than having sex where it's not meant to happen; and it's a relief, sometimes, to find ancient buildings that, like the grand mosque (or the cathedral) of Córdoba, or the objects in Remco Roes' visual essay presented here, remain unresolved, or find new uses that their original designers never intended.

It is ironic that the modernist architects who vandalised the formal integrity of the room – Frank Lloyd Wright, who took away its comforting corners, Mies van der Rohe, who dissolved its walls into glass and polished onyx, and Le Corbusier, who turned it into an incident on a promenade – were determinists who believed that their formal games could predict and provoke the aesthetics and ethics of human behaviour.

It isn't enough just to imply aesthetic incompleteness, or to design it, or to use its visual language. In order to grant liberty to their occupants, rooms have to be ugly, somehow, or at least incomplete – either in space (deprived of enclosure, violated) or time (wrecked, collaged, rearranged, redecorated). Only then are their occupants obliged to complete them.

A broken chair in an untidy room reminds us that freedom is not a right, or a luxury, it is the obligation to think, act, and participate: we need to decide what to do with it. In *The Uses of Disorder*, Richard Sennett wrote:

When a machine's parts wear down, which is their 'form of experience' in time, the machine cannot operate. But the essence of human development is that growth occurs when old routines break down, when old parts are no longer enough for the needs of the new organism, this same kind of change, in a larger sphere, creates the phenomenon of history in a culture.²

Freedom requires us to engage with (but not to accept) all sorts of infelicities, for the incompleteness that grants it is, of its nature, *unbecoming*. It's an ugly word: a negative, the disintegration of a state of being; but it's a necessary negative: interiors are misused, they fall apart, they are forgotten – because we live in them.

And so the stories contained in this journal are stories about living in interiors, in ways that are messy, unintended, and for those very reasons, creative.

Agnishikha Choudhuri's paper on waste invites interior designers to borrow from the discourses of product design a more subtle understanding of how people use things, and spaces, and how they dispose of them. Roes' installation does just that; taking forgotten rubbish out of a forgotten store cupboard, and instead of throwing it away (or leaving it there), putting it in the sunlight, and turning, for a moment into an expression of the sublime. Lorella Di Cintio and Jonsara Ruth's examination of the house in Detroit starts as a process of observation, but soon the neighbours are calling, and there's a campaign to turn the house into a community centre. The frantic decoration of the apartment in New York, or the dark, bitter glamour of the Berlin power station make them wonderful places for a party. The insertion of the cathedral into the mosque in Córdoba creates unexpected and beautiful sound-worlds; and Marie Antoinette reappears, a century and a half after her execution, as an imaginary figment in the Galerie des Glaces.

Designing interiors is the process, we were taught once upon a time, of finding a place for everything, and putting everything in its place; but it isn't that, and never was. Interiors are always unbecoming, and their fragmentary arrangements invite

rearrangement and fragmentation all the time. If it ain't broke, don't fix it, they say. If it is, don't fix it either: work with the brokenness, and who knows what you might end up with.

It's a hard doctrine for practicing designers to swallow, but it is an idea that has gained increasing currency over the past decade, and which is reflected in the essays published here. In *Did Someone Say Participate?: An Atlas of Spatial Practice*, Michael Hirsch writes:

Making conflicts vivid and visible present them to a so called critical public: this seems to be the center of this (new left) aesthetic. Where conservative right wing and totalitarian aesthetics believes in forms and images of unity and consensus... the new left-wing aesthetics seems to believe in the beauty of unresolvable conflicts and their expression. It is an aestheticism of antagonism.³

And the atlas' editors, Markus Miessen and Shumon Basar describe 'the spatial practitioner' as

an outsider who, instead of trying to set up or sustain common denominators of consensus, enters existing situations or projects by deliberately instigating conflicts between often delineated fields of knowledge. In this context, the spatial practitioner is presented as an enabler, a facilitator of interaction that stimulates alternative debates and speculations.⁴

It is no longer the necessary role of the interior designer to resolve problems, but to articulate them, or make speculation or debate about them possible: by sitting in an abandoned house, rearranging junk in a storeroom, wandering aimlessly through endless tunnels, or, dare I say it, by redecorating rooms with patterns they were never intended to contain.

Some papers here describe and consider speculative projects of this type, in which respond to unbecoming over time. Susan Hedges' account of the suturing and binding of a deteriorating Victorian asylum in Auckland bears witness to the wounds that the building has suffered over time, and so does Di Cintio and Ruth's

consideration of a ruined house in Detroit. Heather Peterson's *Vanity and Entombment of Marie Antoinette* occupies a more highly charged place: a particular time, a particular person, and a pivotal point in history and finds, in its momentary reoccurrence centuries after it has passed, redemption of a sort. Roes' much quieter visual essay bears witness to the sublimity of that taken-for-granted moment in time – the present – that infinitesimally tiny hinge upon which the future turns into the past.

But another, more unexpected theme runs through these papers – the simple fact that they are stories. In almost all of them, fiction makes an appearance to illuminate fact. Sometimes, the two are promiscuously mixed: the act of design is compared by Pombo and Aeschbacher not just to the mythical figure of Daedalus, but also the fiction writer Nathaniel Hawthorne, and the factual Edith Farnsworth. Charles V's famous regret for having built the cathedral in Córdoba is proved to be an eighteenth century fiction. Hedges' reading of the 'bandaging' of walls suggests that buildings can be considered as metaphors for people; and Kirsty Volz's account of people pretending to be walls inverts the same metaphor, turning architectural elements from passive bystanders to active agents in human dramas. Peterson's figment of Marie Antoinette is a fiction inside a fiction: an account made up by a made up conservator, collaged together from faked typescripts and pages torn from Antonia Fraser's imaginative, rather than scientific, biography of the Queen.

This promiscuous mixing of discourses invites the reader to sidle through interiors that are both redolent with imagined spaces and situations, and sensual and haptic experiences: through clouds of organ music and Visigothic arches, solid walls that shimmer with close-painted pattern, recorded and imagined pasts; people painted up and dressed down for a night out, or drifting through tunnels to unknown destinations. Fiction has one system of proof, and fact, supposedly, another; but we do not have to read them separately, for both of them represent experience, and we experience both of them simultaneously.

This is a liberty, of a particularly unbecoming sort, in which neatly circumscribed systems break down, and having broken down,

allow the reader – and the writer – to explore all sorts of truths; truths of the sort that, just like interiors themselves, slip between disciplines and discourses, between the furniture, the wallpaper, and the architecture, down the back of the sofa, where, finding themselves among everything else that everyone has forgotten about, they are liberated from the purposes for which they were made, and are free to pursue unbecoming lives and to tell unbecoming stories all of their own.

NOTES

1. Tim Edensor, "British Industrial Ruins," http://www.sci-eng.mmu.ac.uk/british_industrial_ruins/ (accessed August, 2012)
2. Richard Sennett, *The Uses of Disorder* (New York: Knopf, 1970), 98-99.
3. M. Miessen, M. and S. Basar (eds.) *Did Someone Say Participate?: An Atlas of Spatial Practice* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 294.
4. *Ibid.*, 25.