

Erased Domesticity: an abandoned house in Detroit

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ABSTRACT

An abandoned house in post-industrial, post-riot Detroit had been stripped of all its useable parts. The walls were cracking and peeling and nature was taking over. Erasure of domesticity was settling in, yet the unconscious house breathed lives lived through its painted surfaces and its broken utilities.

ERASED DOMESTICITY: AN ABANDONED HOUSE IN DETROIT

In precedent-setting ways, Detroit's neighbourhoods have been a focus for grass-roots activists and artists for many years. Abandoned city blocks are converted to allow urban farming. Abandoned houses are used to store bales of hay and farm equipment. Tall grasses grace the urban landscape, allowing the re-introduction of wildlife habitats: most notably, the region's pheasants – previously endangered – begin to return. The famed *Heidelberg Project*, known for its arts advocacy work, is a tourist destination. Paradoxically, today the city of Detroit is the first American city to declare bankruptcy.

On the corner of Concord and Warren streets in East Detroit, near the defunct Packard automobile plant, a modest century-old duplex stood vacant (Figure 1). Between 1998 and 2001 our physical investigation of this abandoned dwelling (*The House*) produced wide-ranging discoveries regarding the politics of the city, the strife of an unemployed working-class neighbourhood, economies of construction, and comforts of domesticity – as well as insights into how, when all is stripped away, emptiness can stimulate the human spirit to imagine anew.

Probing the latent interior of *The House* suggested previously unasked questions about interior design pedagogy and practice. At first glance, notions of socio-spatial polarisation, anonymity of users, and makers of the interior extend phenomenological discourse on perception and experience.



Latent interiors seem to create a solid but invisible boundary – one that is limited by historical-economic-socio-political powers. The once-commoditised interior becomes an obsolete interior; it takes on a new identity as a symbolic ruin – namely in this case becoming *erased domesticity*. Can the interior ruin then manifest itself into a new entity? Can spatial reclamation be seen in tangible and intangible ways? Can the intangible geographies of the interior be perceived sensorially? Can the invisible be made visible by way of the surface, object or space?

DISAPPEARING DOMESTIC INTERIORS

At the beginning of the project, it was easy to draw the obvious analogy of *The House* as body. This body, this house, had been stripped of all its useable parts. The organs had been cleverly recycled and dispersed throughout the surrounding neighbourhood. All that remained was skin and bones. The skin was dry, cracking and peeling. The skeleton – the interior structure and foundation – was crumbling. The decay process had already begun (Figures 2, 3 and 4). Yet somehow amongst the debris and residue there remained a mysterious soulfulness. The abandoned house on its lot seemed to represent itself as an island – an island of emptiness. An unexpected empathy between the researchers formed for this apparently inanimate object we referred to as *The House*.

Above
Figure 1: *The House* at the corner of Concord and Warren, 1998.
©Photo: Di Cintio & Ruth.



Opposite
 Figure 2: Interior view, first floor kitchen, 1998.
 ©Photo: Di Cintio & Ruth.

Above
 Figure 3: Interior view, first floor bedroom, 1998.
 ©Photo: Di Cintio & Ruth.



Practically and functionally speaking, we know house as shelter – protection from the elements. In the case of *The House* we were studying, we began to wonder: Who were the original dwellers? Why did this particular house become abandoned? Did the mortgage and/or the taxes go unpaid? In time, we would learn how meaning differs when a house is described as ‘abandoned’, as opposed to being described as ‘vacant’. When outsiders view an ‘abandoned’ house, there is an odd feeling that a crime may have been committed. They may also assume that only people on the margin would feel at home in this house. Yet, for the individuals living inside the City of Detroit, these houses were merely ‘vacant’. The living history and eventual vacancy had been due mainly to the declining economic health of those who had lived there. It became clear that the perceptions of outsiders consider the City of Detroit as still being based in the past – its historical markers emerging from the 1960s. Terms like ‘white flight’ and ‘race riots’ dominate the psyche of many North Americans in relation to Detroit.

As we reflected, it became clear that we must ask ourselves two questions. Why were we trying to preserve the memory of *The House*? Also, were we exploring the concept of threat? It seemed that we were bridging the boundaries of fear, and the intrigue of the disappearing domestic interior.

THE HOUSE AS SOCRATIC TEACHER

The methodology we used to investigate *The House* was similar to an educational tool used in the medical profession – a 400-year-old tradition in directional reading: the dissection of a cadaver. A pseudo-interactive dialogue commenced: *The House* presented itself as an open book – a deceased body to which questions were posed. Acting as apprentices, we began the dissection by answering the questions, explaining by means of visual responses (Figures 5 and 6).

As we dissected, revealed, experienced and processed, a new method of practice was evolving (Figures 7 and 8). We treated *The House* as a laboratory, an examination room, a place of intense and quiet concentration. After a year of regular examination and contemplation, we attempted to project individual and collective ideas for the future of *The House*.

During this time, our focus was only on the interior rooms. The contextual studies of the City of Detroit needed to be separated from our research investigation. ‘Detroit’ was too complex to fully undertake, yet we felt that issues relating to the City of Detroit were revealed through our work at *The House*. The contained space (*The House*) came to feel both safe and somewhat secretive to us.

To our colleagues, our design practice was perplexing. What we were seeing and feeling were oftentimes difficult to communicate. Unconsciously, an artificial boundary had been created. We wondered if we were becoming too protective of our new experiences. We developed a desire to be at *The House* as if it were some kind of an obsession. We struggled with, and were often criticised by our peers for, our inability to impose a concrete design programme. We questioned

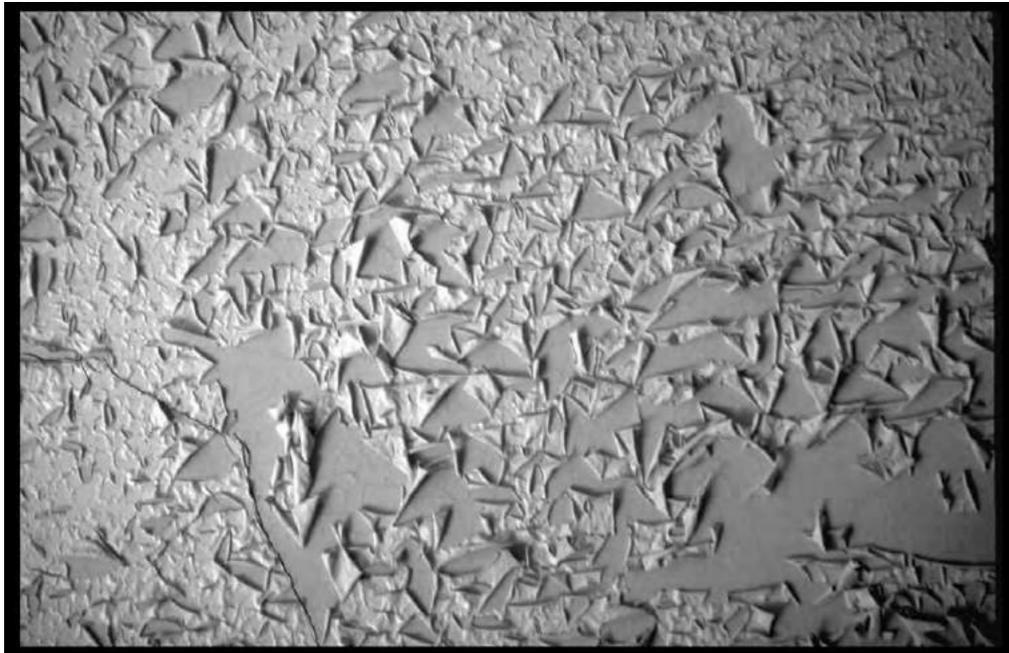
Opposite
Figure 4: Interior view, first floor bathroom, 1998.
©Photo: Di Cintio & Ruth.

whether our attention to detail and experience was simply driven by aesthetics. Yet our curiosity about interior aesthetics propelled us more than the pursuit of a practical goal.

We felt that if we were to define a goal or attempt to impose a design programme for the project, it would be an artificial end – a task completed without full recognition of the existing power of the place. We realised that if we remained open, we had the opportunity to see aspects of *The House* and of Detroit that could not be anticipated. With this in mind, we made a conscious effort to bring openness to our research collaboration. We found that we had to be flexible about our decisions and impose limits as co-creators in order to work together on this experiential research project.

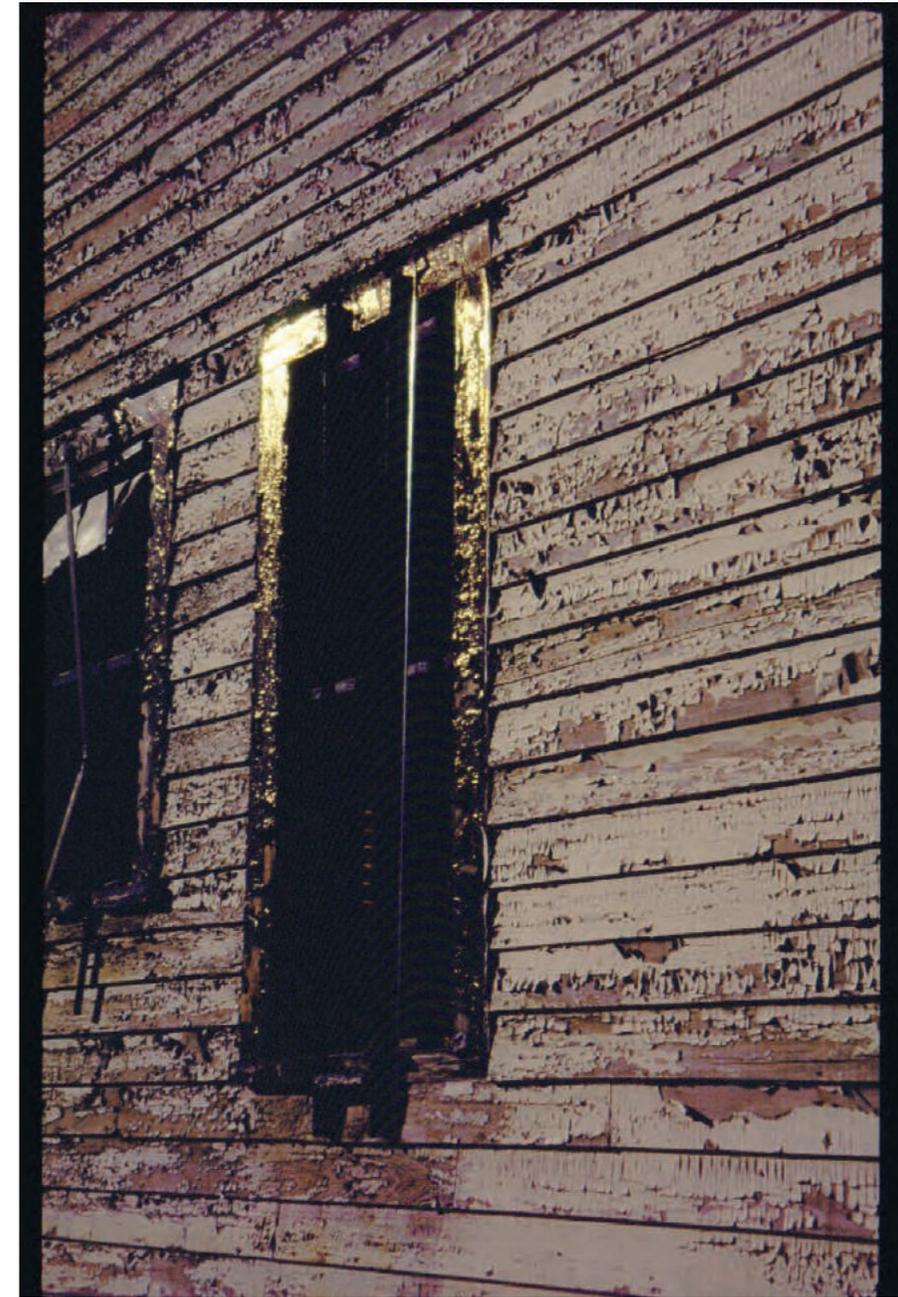
We saw that at times, no matter what our intentions were for the project, it was really the nature of the city's history that

would dictate the outcomes. Once we recognised the unpredictable nature of our work at *The House*, we encountered a kind of sensitivity and spirituality that seemed to be separated from ourselves. It may have been one of those glorious days when the autumn sunset shone through the fragmented windows, walls and doors. Or when the sun magically illuminated the exterior paint, allowing it to sparkle and seem to reveal an under-painting on a golden surface (Figure 9). For many months, we never discussed with each other these magical moments we experienced. We knew from the beginning of our collaboration that our individual pursuits were important for our separate personal desires and senses of achievement. Today, we understand that our collaborative experiences were based on our mutual ability to place an elevated sensibility on the reading of material environments to understand the intangible and human experience.



Opposite
Figure 5: Interior view, first floor bedroom, 1998.
©Photo: Ruth.

Above
Figure 6: Second floor, electrical outlet, 1998.
©Photo: Ruth.



Opposite top

Figure 7: Interior view, second floor bedroom, paint layer removal, 1999.
©Photo: Di Cintio & Ruth.

Opposite bottom

Figure 8: Interior view, first floor bedroom, vinyl removal, 1999; 1966 newspaper discovered underneath, which was one year before Detroit race riots.
©Photo: Di Cintio.

Above

Figure 9: Exterior view, October sunset, illuminated under-painting, 1998.
©Photo: Di Cintio & Ruth.

METHODOLOGIES

Why did we feel the need to document the *erased domestic interior*? How were we different from those who studied via the method of deconstruction of an entire building? Perhaps, for them the visceral physicality of the removal process was the central focus. In our case, we drew parallels to the dissection process. Our approach attempted to understand the *erased domestic interior* from the point of view of the previous users and makers of space.

We examined and dissected *The House* as if it were a specimen – our method similar to that of a medical student or an archaeologist. Guided by inquiry into domesticity, issues of gendered and safe spaces, public perception of abandoned houses, and impositions of the outside practitioner, our responses were visual, material, and spatial. In some instances, we allowed the artefacts and interiors to remain in their existing conditions, while in other cases pieces were intentionally transformed to either reveal the past or create

something new. In all situations, collected images and artefacts revealed multiple histories, while the project and the experiences propelled our ongoing research (Figures 10 and 11).

Our research drew on women's ways of experiencing, understanding, and valuing the world. The investigation reflected 'ethics of care', in which co-operation, relationships, and care for others essentially replace conflict, confrontation, and notions regarding 'rights' and 'duties'.

'Expert knowledge' traditionally grants primacy of knowledge to the educator and/or practitioner. The passive recipients of knowledge are the students and/or clients. Our pursuit was not toward a particular programmatic goal or a project in adaptive reuse. Instead, we engaged in a process of re-evaluating traditional design practice and pedagogy, specifically positioning ourselves away from the conventional approach of imposing 'expert' knowledge.



Opposite
Figure 10: Interior view, first floor bedroom, vinyl removal, 1966 newspaper discovered underneath; detail, 'The Good Housekeeper', 'No High Financial Charge', 1999. ©Photo: Di Cintio.

Above
Figure 11: Dictionary list of 're', typed on onion skin paper, 1998. ©Photo: Ruth.

We concluded that feminist theory and practices, and more particularly ecofeminism¹, were relevant to interior-design education, while our empirical and vigilant observational approach to gaining knowledge confirmed the notion that 'making is thinking' – a point that Richard Sennett convincingly presented in 2008 in his book entitled *The Craftsman*.² In 2009, Juhani Pallasmaa writes in *The Thinking Hand*: '[...] There is a search in obscurity and darkness of uncertainty, in which a subjective certainty is gradually achieved through the laborious process of the search itself. This search is as much an embodied and tactile journey, guided by the hand and feelings of the body, as it is a visual and intellectual enterprise.'³

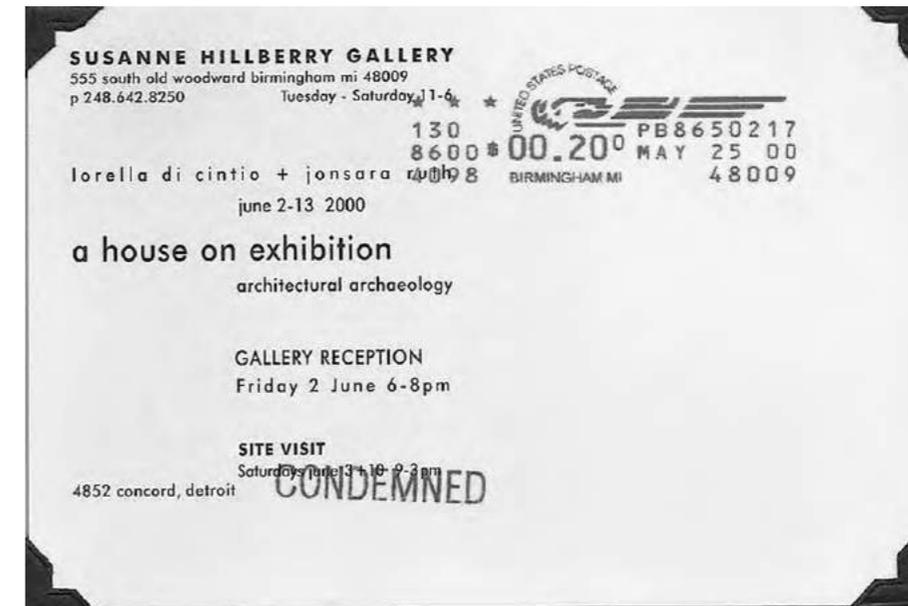
KNOWLEDGE MOBILISATION

Initially, we struggled with imposing our ideas or remotely speculating on the place and the people in the neighbourhood. Yet during the process of clearing out loose residue and the beginnings of the photographic studies, an interesting series of events occurred. It was as if the combination of our presence and the act of clearing the space had initiated a creation of ideas. Visitors, critics, artists, neighbours and passers-by began to generate, share, forecast, dream and inspire ideas onto *The House*.

In the final months of the project we attempted to transfer our experience in a socially responsible way. First, we shared our visual experiences in the form of an exhibition of the artefacts found at *The House* (Figure 12). Then we attempted to allow *The House* to remain as an educational tool for community members, educators and artists (Figure 13). We invited several members of the community to listen to our proposals for conducting experiential architectural studios, symposia, and community-related activities at *The House*. The latter part of the project proved to be a far more complex venture than we had anticipated. Long-term commitments and funds would have been necessary to save *The House*. Instead, it was demolished.

As we left Detroit, we wondered how we could give more to *The House* and its neighbours, or to other cities with interiors waiting to be discovered or studied. It became clear to us that interior-design pedagogy needs to change.

Today *The House* has ceased to exist due to a mandated citywide demolition programme (Figure 14). Yet, perhaps *The House* did not exist even when we were there – the visible ruin is now invisible. Similar to explorers and pirates, we are left with a few fragments of broken glass, nails, and paint chips, and binders full of slide images and notes. These physical objects are our only documentation of a time shared, explored and cherished. The final statement with which we are left is this: Detroit must be experienced (Figure 15).



Above top
Figure 12: Susanne Hillberry Gallery, back of exhibition invitation; *The House* was condemned two days before site visit, 2000.
Image: Di Cintio & Ruth.

Above bottom
Figure 13: Mimi and Mann, our neighbours and friends, rebuilding their city, 1999.
©Photo: Di Cintio.



NOTES

1. Val Plumwood, "Current trends in Ecofeminism," *Feminism and Ecofeminism*, *Ecologist* 22, (January-February 1992): 8-13.
2. Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1, 2009): 290
3. Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Thinking Hand: Existential and Embodied Wisdom in Architecture* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), 107-9.

Opposite top
 Figure 14: Concord and Warren lot, two years after the city-mandated demolition.
 The boulevard tree remains, 2002. ©Photo: Ruth.

Opposite bottom
 Figure 15: An interior space defined without walls, 1998
 ©Photo: Di Cintio.