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unplanned interiors

vol. 22, no. 01

2025

the journal of IDEA: the interior design + interior architecture educators association

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about

Idea Journal recognises interiors and interiority as emerging, discursive, and interdisciplinary fields of research across spatially oriented design, artistic, and architectural practices. It promotes the production of new knowledge on interiors and interiority through the critical appraisal of the conceptual, material, and social relationships between people and built environments. Uniquely, *Idea Journal* provides a space for scholarly engagement through the publication of both text-based and visual-based research essays. It serves an international academic, professional, and student readership, and welcomes contributions from researchers and practitioners involved in bolstering theoretical and creative discourse on spatial design.

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Launched in 1999, *Idea Journal* is an international, double-blind peer-reviewed academic journal dedicated to publishing scholarly and practice-based research on interiors and interiority. *Idea Journal* is an open-access publication that produces one journal issue annually. It is a subsidiary of the parent institution IDEA—The Interior Design / Interior Architecture Educators Association.

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THE OFFERING – Community Hall, Pre-demolition 1900s Baptist Church, Dandenong (2011). Robbie Rowlands.

copy editor

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design + production

Lauren Poynter

correspondence

Correspondence regarding this publication should be addressed to:

Andrew Wallace
Chair IDEA
Andrew.Wallace@unisa.edu.au

this issue's provocation

Planning is a cornerstone of designing interior spaces, yet the complexity of planning to predict and accommodate the future actions, behaviours, and needs of would-be occupants is rarely resolved. In 1978, Robin Evans showed us that the 'moral geography' of the plan had a mercurial relationship with the composition of interior spaces and that the ordinary, unassuming, and unexamined elements of domestic interiors change in time to reflect our emergent social values. At the same time, Manfredo Tafuri's analysis of the endless interiors in Piranesi's *Il Campo Marzio dell'antica Roma* ichnographia engraving showed us that the unprescribed interpretation of the plan was the only way to surpass the well-intentioned mistakes of functional and utopian idealism.

The 2025 issue of *Idea Journal* sought contributions that explored the history, theory, practice, and futures of unplanned interiors. In opposition to the aesthetic idealisation of interior compositions in the commercial contexts of department stores, lifestyle magazines, and presentation drawings, it asked authors to consider the un-ideal interior. How do interior spaces work in ways that are unplanned, unforeseen, and unintended? What do instances of human action exceeding the prescriptive ideas of the plan tell us about who we are, our emergent social and moral values, and where these values are going? In the contexts of rising climate and political uncertainty, what is the significance of agility, temporality, and openness to change needed for new approaches to interior planning?

Authors were encouraged to use text-based research essays to offer new knowledge on how unplanned interiors reflect the social and cultural conditions of their time. They were also invited to use image-based research essays to respond to, comment on, and convey ideas of unplanned spatial practices.

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editorial introduction

Welcome to the 2025 issue of *Idea Journal: Unplanned Interiors.* This year presents an insightful series of essays that carefully examine thought-provoking and poignant examples of interior environments that surpass the limits of planning in spatial design.

Planning is a cornerstone of conceiving and constructing interior spaces, yet we continually find that our built environments cannot predict and accommodate the complexity of our actions, behaviours, and needs. As a result, we have an endlessly dynamic, indeterminable relationship between designers' intentions and the unpredictability of life that we rarely examine directly. The idea of the unplanned in some respects is uncomfortable, even frustrating, but by accepting its involvement in daily space-making practices, we can challenge traditions and gain new insights. All of the essays in this issue engage with the difficult task of looking beyond idealised examples of intended or expected designs. Through examining the unplanned, these authors identify the compassion, courage, humour, and beauty of our humanity that structure the built environment more than any plan ever could.

Xia Bi and Kin Wai Michael Siu find that in response to Hong Kong's abundance of overcrowded domestic apartments, individuals tactically reshape public open spaces to create moments of solitude, effectively transforming them into unplanned urban interiors. These interior-like experiences emerge through relational and socio-material conditions rather than formal architectural enclosures. Lorena Quintana and Florencia Vetcher are also interested in acts that unsettle planned domestic occupation. They explain how 'performative insertions' contribute to unplanned ideas of inhabitation through acting as experimental demonstrations. Their essay collects a range of examples, such as Rietveld's sliding screens and Andrés Jaque's *Rolling Architecture*, to describe how performative insertions challenge fixed domestic scripts and point to possibilities for communal, mobile, or marginalised forms of dwelling.

Several of the essays address the reality that living in unplanned ways often results from challenging experiences. Nevena Mrdjenovic shows us how warzones are environments where the unplanned is constantly at play. Her contribution considers how interiors inhabited in the immediate aftermath of forced displacement are spaces where survival, agency, and disorientation unfold simultaneously. She offers scenography as both an analytical and an activist tool for revealing fragile, improvised domestic worlds and for reframing them as political sites of resistance. Similarly, in this issue's visual essay, Rana Abudayyeh looks at interiors made both for and by displaced people. Using fieldwork images, diagrams, and animations, Abudayyeh describes how Syrian refugees in Al Zaatari Camp continually reshape standardised shelters through improvisation, turning rigid humanitarian layouts into lived, adaptive interiors. Endriana Audisho examines yet another kind of unplanned transformation wrought by war. She documents how the interiors of the Holiday Inn in Beirut and the Al-Rashid Hotel in Baghdad act as contingent infrastructures, radically diverging from the cosmopolitan contexts for which they were designed, revealing how conflict reorganises spatial and social order.

Turning to the creative exploration of ideas of the unplanned in drawing, Andrea Crudeli's essay examines how FALA Atelier's post-digital illustrations and unbuilt residential projects produce interiors that resist prescriptive planning. Crudeli positions domestic space as an adaptable framework shaped by user agency and emerging

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social dynamics. Edward Hollis similarly explores the intersections of memory, story, and space through three interiors in postcolonial Asansol. These are interior spaces transformed by everyday adaptations, ghostly histories, and the layering of many stories over time. Hollis shows how drawing and collaborative storytelling can unplan these interiors, turning them into open, relational works that invite ongoing retelling.

Connections between unplanned, domestic spaces and feminist interiors emerge in several essays. Samantha Donnelly focuses on women's refuges that rely on unplanned, adaptive interiors as essential components of trauma-informed care, shaped through everyday acts of maintenance, negotiation, and relational support. She shows that these flexible spatial practices, enacted by both workers and residents, challenge conventional design norms and reveal care as an ongoing, collaborative spatial process. Francesca Romana Forlini's essay finds a connection between transformation and the unplanned in the context of domestic interiors. Forlini examines emerging social roles and ways of inhabiting space within Italian modernist homes and how women's continuous, often subtle spatial modifications constitute a process of *detraditionalisation*. She describes this process as an embodied, unplanned practice that challenges the patriarchal logics embedded in domestic interiors.

The final essays examine aspects of unplanned engagements between our built and natural environments. By tracing the evolving life of her family's Queenslander, Zuzana Kovar reframes domestic interiors and architecture through the concept of 'scaffolding/ing.' This is a process of ecological assemblage in which buildings, bodies, and other creatures co-constitute evolving spaces of inhabitation through ongoing support and transformation. John Stanislav Sadar and Gyungju Chyon focus on the material world and document a series of encounters with mycelium and moss. The living materials behave unpredictably as they transform and decay, unsettling the authors and provoking repulsion, dream-induced dread, and self-examination. These unplanned moments become invitations to rethink the recurrent modernist values of contemporary interior design through the lens of temporality and ecological entanglement.

We would like to extend our deepest appreciation to this year's authors for their contributions to the 2025 issue of *Idea Journal: Unplanned Interiors*. It has been wonderful working with you and seeing your essays develop in depth and significance. We extend a special thanks to artist Robbie Rowlands, whose photograph of his 2011 interior installation, *THE OFFERING – Community Hall, Pre-demolition 1900s Baptist Church*, is the cover of this issue. The haunting beauty of Robbie's work embodies the ideas of unplanned transformation and change. His intervention, and its image, prompt us to reflect on how unforeseen change is as much a part of our interior environments as their stability.

We would also like to sincerely thank this year's peer reviewers for lending their time and expertise, which helped support our authors with their valuable comments, reflections, and references. Thanks go to our production team, Madeleine Collinge for her editing services, Lauren Poynter for her graphic design services, and the IDEA Board and its member institutions for their continued support and resources, with special thanks to the Chair of IDEA, Andrew Wallace, and the Treasurer of IDEA, Dr Penny Wild.

Finally, we would like to thank you, our readers, for remaining vigilant and curious about the critical exploration of the histories, theories, and practices of interior environments.

Please enjoy the 2025 issue of *Idea Journal: Unplanned Interiors.*

Sincerely,

Luke Tipene, Executive Editor of *Idea Journal*, and Dr Olivia Hamilton, Editor of *Idea Journal*.

emergent solitude: unplanned interiority in hong kong's public spaces

Xia Bi
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University
0000-0002-2337-3964

Kin Wai Michael Siu
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University
0000-0002-9820-8576

abstract

In Hong Kong's densely populated urban environments, domestic spaces often fail to meet residents' need for privacy and solitude, leading to an increase in the individuated use of public open spaces. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in the city's public housing estates and sitting-out areas, this essay demonstrates how individuals actively appropriate these spaces to carve out moments of solitude, thus subverting their prescribed functions. It explores how the relational affordances that were initially designed for social interaction adapt to accommodate isolated behaviours, effectively transforming them into unplanned urban interiors. And it highlights tensions between utilitarian urban planning and the fluid, adaptive needs of residents.

By conceptualising public spaces as unplanned interiors, this essay challenges the traditional distinctions between public and private, social and solitary. It shows how interiority is a crucial aspect of Hong Kong's urban ecosystem, and proposes a relational understanding of these urban spaces that acknowledges their function in compensating for domestic inadequacies. Further, it enhances our understanding of solitude as a collective social action that should be acknowledged in the spatial design of densely populated urban environments. And it advocates for public space design as a third space that relationally considers the cultural and spatial dynamics between domestic and work spaces.

keywords

interiority; solitude; public space; Hong Kong; unplanned interior

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introduction

Living in Hong Kong is a unique experience. In my university dormitory, I was assigned a tiny, cramped shared bedroom, with only a narrow aisle, barely an arm's length across, separating my bed from my roommate's. With thin partition walls and a bathroom shared with eight other students, the noise and presence of others feel constant. Stepping outside, the city presents an overwhelming intensity: hurried, bustling streets, densely packed pedestrian flows, vibrant and disorderly shop signage, frequent yelling, and an intense sense of being watched through countless windows. Between the compressed domestic interior and the overstimulating public exterior, one asks where, in such a city, can one experience solitude?

As someone who craves solitude, I began seeking places and situations where I could find them. When I ventured outside, I noticed others practising solitude. Under the shade of a tree next to a residential building, a man was enjoying a takeaway meal; nearby, an older man was slowly exercising with his eyes closed. At one end of a bench sat a young girl wearing headphones and watching anime on her phone, while at the other end, a foreign domestic helper was making a TikTok video, a leashed dog resting beside her leg. A young student sat by a flower bed with his legs crossed, playing a mobile game, and a construction worker napped on a chair against the wall. These practices of solitude took place in a tiny space next to a public housing building, frequently traversed by other residents. The individuals I saw did not interact with each other.

I walked into the space and sat down among them. No-one looked up. In that moment, I slipped out of the busy pedestrian flow and fast-paced urban bustle. The relentless urban tempo softened into a distant hum in the background. I began to focus on myself, just like the others around me. Within this small pocket of public space, the other solitary individuals had collectively created an atmosphere of ease. It was not a silence born of emptiness, but one nurtured through mutual non-interference: a shared yet individual experience that rendered the space calm without requiring enclosure. Here, solitude was not the absence of others but the presence of a gentle spatial agreement to enjoy solitude together.

This observed inversion of spatial expectations provoked critical reflection, leading me to re-evaluate Eurocentric assumptions about solitude. These assumptions tend to conceptualise solitude as a form of withdrawal from society, rooted in the modern experience of the individual within the metropolis, as described by Georg Simmel and later by Norbert Elias in his account of the civilising process.[1] Moreover, solitude has been spatially idealised as a condition enabled by privacy and physical enclosure, exemplified in Henry David Thoreau's retreat to Walden Pond and Gaston Bachelard's poetics of the intimate house interior.[2] However, having resided in less dense cities in divergent cultural contexts, I had internalised the notion that solitude was best sought within a private, enclosed space, often my bedroom. I had conceptually framed public spaces as sites for interaction, gathering, and social connection.[3] In Hong Kong, however, this paradigm seemed to be subverted. Here, the scarcity of autonomous private rooms, compounded by space compression, room sharing, and acoustic–visual permeability, renders domestic interiors inadequate for solitude. Public space is reconstituted as a collective repository for solitary practice. Individuals carve out ephemeral experiences and zones of interiority in open yet private ways.

The city's extreme density and domestic constraints generate a unique social–spatial network, encouraging an unprecedented demand for solitude and leading me to view urban public space anew, through the lens of unmet solitary needs. Public spaces globally prioritise sociability, and Hong Kong is no exception. Yet my observations revealed that solitude-seeking behaviours are a dominant yet overlooked practice.[4] Crucially, citizens autonomously adapt urban environments through tactical appropriation, carving out unplanned interiority by repurposing socially programmed public spaces for solitary

use. This occurs despite formidable constraints, including spatial compression, hypervisibility under institutional surveillance, and managerial regimes that restrict prolonged occupancy.

As the architectural theorist Charles Rice argues, spatial–political relations are emergent co-constructions, neither predetermined nor static but continually reconfigured through practice.[5] In Hong Kong's public spaces, the self-organised adaptations of solitude-seekers embody such citizen-led spatial negotiations. Their tactical reclamations of benches, ledges, and marginal zones constitute what the scholar Michel de Certeau might term 'tactics', quiet claims to bodily autonomy within managerial urban regimes.[6]

Emergent solitary practices cannot be reduced to individual acts of resistance. The desire for solitude in public spaces forms an ecology of affordances within Hong Kong's cultural and urban life. Affordance theory, originating in James J. Gibson's framework of ecological psychology, examines the action potentials perceived by agents within their environments.[7] Early applications focused on functional interactions between users and discrete physical features.[8] In particular, Donald A. Norman, a researcher and vice-president of Apple Computer Co., prioritised these interactions in his user-centred design framework. However, contemporary urban scholarship contests this legacy. Some critics, for instance, argue that early approaches were reductive, flattening cities' socio-spatial complexity and neglecting how affordances are dynamically (re) negotiated through culturally embedded practices, power relations, and temporal contingencies.[9]

To move beyond a simplified deterministic view of the urban environment, this essay adopts a relational socio-spatial perspective that recognises solitary practices as produced through the entanglement of social practices, spatial configurations, and everyday negotiations. This approach draws from the relational framework recently proposed by Quentin Stevens, Jonathan Daly, and Kim Dovey that integrates assemblage thinking, actor–network theory, and affordance theory.[10] According to this framework, affordances do not arise solely from human intentions or material properties. Instead, they emerge through fluid and situated networks of interaction between human and non-human actants: cultural norms, institutional policies, environmental conditions, and other human beings collectively shaping the emergence of practices.

From this relational socio-spatial perspective, we conducted in-depth ethnographic studies of Hong Kong sites popular for solitude. We aimed to answer two intertwined questions: What relational conditions enable solitude to emerge in public spaces in Hong Kong? And how do these solitude practices co-construct unplanned interiority within this urban context?

solitude and relational affordances

Solitude is often considered both a physical and a psychological condition, typically defined by withdrawal from social contact. However, its meanings and forms are diverse. The psychology researcher Reed W. Larson defines solitude as an objective cybernetic separation, a state in which the immediate exchange of information and affect is interrupted or suspended, whether physically or virtually.[11] In psychology, this is often associated with seclusion and a reduction in social stimuli. Yet scholars increasingly recognise that physical isolation is not always necessary for the experience of solitude. The psychology researchers Christopher R. Long and James R. Averill demonstrate that individuals can enter a state of solitude even when others are physically nearby, as long as no direct social interaction occurs.[12] The psychologist Robert J. Coplan and colleagues similarly distinguish between solitude as a state of mind and as a state of being, suggesting that spatial disconnection is less critical than attentional and affective withdrawal.[13]

Building on these distinctions, the psychology researcher Thuy-vy T. Nguyen and co-authors introduce the terms 'public solitude' and 'private

solitude' to differentiate between being alone in the presence of others and being physically isolated, respectively.[14] While the latter is often described as 'real solitude', involving intentional separation from all social interaction, public solitude allows for a more complex negotiation of space, attention, and behaviour.[15] It is a form of public solitude that most frequently emerges in urban contexts, where individuals tactically withdraw within shared spaces.

Understanding solitude as a spatially negotiated and socially embedded phenomenon provides a foundation for examining how it emerges within Hong Kong's dense urban fabric. The average living space per person in Hong Kong is approximately 16 square metres, with many households consisting of three or more members sharing a compact unit.[16] Staying at home often means being cramped and restricted, with little visual or acoustic privacy from other family members. This unideal interior situation of limited privacy may strengthen the desire for solitude as an opportunity to enjoy oneself. In such a context, solitude cannot be accommodated within private interiors. Instead, it takes shape as a spatial event, distributed across public environments amid urban crowdedness. Being alone in an exclusively segregated environment and achieving 'private solitude' or 'real solitude' is therefore rare in Hong Kong's urban context. However, the limitations imposed by space and crowding have fostered another mode of solitude: a shared condition in which people tactically disengage from each other while remaining physically close. The presence of others is not necessarily a threat to solitude. Rather, it can offer a sense of safety and orientation. Jane Jacobs famously argues that 'eyes on the street' provide informal surveillance and social order in urban life.[17] In the context of Hong Kong, these eyes are not only watching for safety but also participating in a tacit agreement of mutual restraint.

To understand the emergence of such solitary practices, we engage with the relational framework of affordances proposed by Stevens, Daly, and Dovey.[18] In this framework, affordances arise not solely from physical form or individual intent but from networks of interaction among bodies, materials, infrastructures, norms, and cultural expectations. From this perspective, affordances that co-construct the desire for solitude are effects of socio-spatial assemblages. These assemblages refer to dynamic configurations of human and non-human elements through which spatial meanings and practices are continuously negotiated.

This relational affordance framework is especially useful for understanding solitude in public spaces. Benches or ledges, for instance, are not typically designed for solitary use. Yet they become capable of supporting solitary behaviour when they are partly shaded, located at the edges of circulation spaces. In Hong Kong, relational affordances are further complexified by being highly dependent on people's desires for autonomy, usage patterns, and social and atmospheric conditions. Stevens and others classify affordances into four types: enabling, constraining, improvised, and serendipitous.[19] Solitude in the public urban spaces examined below often emerges through the latter two types of affordances, improved and serendipitous, whereby individuals creatively repurpose space in ways that differ from the original design intentions.

the hong kong context

Public spaces in Hong Kong are predominantly designed with a functionalist focus that emphasises social interaction. *Hong Kong Planning Standards and Guidelines* (HKPSG) is a government manual that outlines standards and regulations for land use and facilities.[20] Chapter 4 of HKPSG requires open spaces in Hong Kong to support both 'active' and 'passive' recreational activities. It explains the term 'recreation' with reference to home and indoor entertainment, such as mahjong and watching television, as well as outdoor activities, including practising tai-chi and participating in competitive sports. Depending on location and size, open spaces are categorised into regional (at least 5 hectares), district (at least 1 hectare), and local open spaces (at least 500 square metres in

urban areas).[21] In densely populated residential urban areas, local open spaces are more common and take the form of small playgrounds, sitting-out areas, and open spaces in public housing estates.[22] They often accommodate passive recreational activities for local residents, workers, passers-by, and sightseers.[23] According to the Open Space Opinion Survey, 56 per cent of open space visitors often visit and use small playgrounds, sitting-out areas, and open spaces in public housing estates on their own.[24] These public spaces often mediate between domestic and work environments, and play a crucial role for individuals living in Hong Kong's high-density urbanism. In this respect, they operate very much like sociologist Ray Oldenburg's concept of 'third places', which describes places other than home (first place) and work (second place).[25]



Figure 01.
Solitary people gathered in the Portland Street Rest Garden. Photograph: Shan Yue, 2025.

Seating arrangements in these open spaces often face each other or open onto communal areas: sun shelters provide shade for three-seater benches, and sitting-out areas are integrated into pedestrian networks to encourage intergenerational and multicultural interaction. These design intentions reflect normative assumptions about what constitutes proper publicness: visibility, interaction, and shared activity. As such, solitude does not feature prominently in the programmed uses of these public spaces. In 2021, for instance, a renovated version of one of these public spaces was opened to the public.[26] A huge pink table was placed in the centre, with the intention of 'encouraging user interaction'.[27] However, people entering the space often sit alone with no interaction, their backs turned to the table [Fig. 01].

It is within this divergence that we can observe the emergence of what might be understood as unplanned interiority: a condition in which the public realm takes on the affective and spatial qualities of interior space, not through architectural design but through people's adaptation. These moments are neither enclosed nor permanent nor clearly defined. Instead, they are ephemeral, created through bodily positioning, spatial marginality, and atmospheric restraint. In such spaces, individuals find temporary refuge from the overstimulating demands of urban public life, crafting unplanned interior-like experiences within exterior settings.

The design researcher Liz Teston conceptualises public interiority as a condition of the senses, where interior experience emerges not from physical enclosure but from affective, perceptual, and behavioural cues.[28] Such sensory thresholds are embodied in the ways Hong Kong residents claim moments of solitude in open spaces through psychological withdrawal, atmospheric attunement, and bodily orientation. These include turning one's back to pedestrian flow, sitting on the edge of a bench, and using plants and flowerbeds or architectural edges as temporary boundaries. Rather than isolating themselves through physical segregation, people create a sense of interiority through attentional reorientation and micro-spatial positioning. They produce what Liz Teston calls 'porous thresholds', as a performative boundary negotiated through bodily syntax.[29]

Suzie Attiwill further challenges the notion of interiority as an individualised, psychological retreat.[30] Instead, she frames it as a process of collective individuation, shaped through the interrelation of social and environmental ecologies.

This perspective supports this analysis to move beyond a focus on individual, subjective perspective and designer–user–object relationships. Instead, it focuses on the relational socio-spatial dimension that enables the conceptualisation of affordances, practices, and experiences as the emergent products of fluid, socio-material networks involving norms, desires, infrastructures, and everyday practices.[31]

Thus, investigating the emergence of solitude in Hong Kong's public spaces through relational socio-spatial affordance is not only a question of user behaviour or design performance. It is a way of tracing how spatial agency is distributed across socio-spatial assemblages, how sensory thresholds are generated, and how interiority emerges as a situated, ecological event within public space.

emergent solitude in hong kong public spaces

Fieldwork was conducted between September 2023 and March 2025. A mixed-methods approach was employed, involving quantitative observations, qualitative ethnographic interviews, participant observations, and spatial analysis. The study was authorised by the research ethics departmental committee of the first author's affiliated institution.[32] All the participants signed an informed consent form for the on-site interviews. Only data from interviews to which the participants had given their consent are presented in this essay, and all data are presented anonymously. Two investigators of different genders participated in the fieldwork, including the first author. The two investigators had different cultural backgrounds and differed in their understanding of and preferences regarding solitude. They received training in and practised the investigative methods before conducting the fieldwork.

In the Open Space Opinion Survey, Yuen Long, Sham Shui Po, Kowloon City, and Kwai Tsing reported the most solitary public space visitors of all Hong Kong districts. The difference between the proportion of solitary visitors and those who visited public spaces with others was largest in Sham Shui Po, Kowloon City, and Kwai Tsing. Therefore, we conducted screening and systematic observation in these three districts. Based on previous research results, we selected four public spaces of two types.[33] The first comprised small sitting-out areas: the Fat Kwong Street Sitting-out Area and the Ma Tau Road/To Kwa Wan Road Garden in Kowloon City District. The second type comprised open spaces in public housing estates: Pak Tin Estate in Sham Shui Po and Cheung On Estate in Kwai Tsing.

At each of the four sites, we conducted further observations, anthropological interviews, and spatial analysis. These were a series of sequential actions in which we observed different behaviours at the sites, determined how these behaviours related to the space, and examined the social connections between people. During this process, photos, videos, behavioural maps, and field notes were produced. We tried to minimise our impact on other actants in the public space. When we observed that a solitary person planned to get up and end their solitary time, we approached them, politely introduced ourselves, and invited them to take part in an interview. The purpose of this was to respect the solitary experience to the greatest extent possible. After an interview had been conducted and the interviewee had left, the two investigators took the position the interviewee had occupied. Using their bodies as a tool for empathy, they recorded and reflected on the factors and relationships that had influenced the interview content.

case studies — public housing estates

Pak Tin Estate is a public housing estate in Hong Kong, located in Shek Kip Mei, Sham Shui Po District [Fig. 02]. It was put into use in 1975 and has undergone numerous renovations and rebuilds since 1980. Pak Tin Estate accommodates over 8100 households, with a population of more than 23,300 residents. Individual unit areas range between 12.09 and 52.28 square metres. It is expected to accommodate more than 10,000 flats

upon completion of the reconstruction in 2027.[34] Public housing estates, such as Pak Tin Estate, are located throughout Hong Kong, aiming to ease the housing crisis and offer low-income residents affordable rental housing. Nevertheless, families with permanent resident status in Hong Kong who want to live in such estates must wait until a vacancy arises. As of the end of March 2025, the average waiting time for a unit was 5.3 years.[35] The location, environment, age of the estate, and floor level of vacant public housing estates are assigned randomly. Applicants are generally not allowed to specify their preferences.



Figure 02.
Residents sitting alone in a public space in Pak Tin Estate. Photograph: Xia Bi, 2023.

In a public space located between Tai Tin House and Lai Tin House, we met interviewee #PTE20 (code name), a woman in her sixties residing in Pak Tin Estate. She was seated at one end of a three-seater bench, occupying only half the seat, leaning forward and slightly to the side as she quietly and intently ate a roasted sweet potato. 'I just can't get along with my daughter-in-law and my granddaughter,' she said, clutching a full bag of fresh vegetables and other groceries.[36] She lived in a building at the far end of the estate, a considerable distance from where we met her. On her way home from buying ingredients for dinner, she had deliberately detoured to this spot to fill her stomach in advance. 'After cooking for them, I'll come right back down here to exercise. I don't want to listen to their arguments. I want to be as far away from my block as possible. No one bothers me here, except for you,' she said, glancing at us with a smile as we took notes.[37] 'Of course, I enjoy spending time with friends, but I also like being alone and free from interruptions. Who would want to stay in the same place all the time? If I had more money, I'd travel abroad alone,' she said, sitting between three tall residential buildings with countless windows in an estate she had waited to live in for seven years.[38]

After being allocated a public housing unit, families often decide to live together to reduce their living expenses. However, the cramped interior and crowded household environment can lead to subtle yet meaningful changes in family relationships and the atmosphere at home. For #PTE20, whom we met six months after moving into her new flat, the composition of her household, the surrounding neighbourhood, and the rhythms of daily life had all shifted. Yet her role had remained unchanged. As the housewife in the household, she continued to bear the responsibility for shopping and cooking. In this context, her desire to escape the uncomfortable domestic atmosphere, the estate itself, and the stagnation of her surroundings manifested as a fantasy of travelling abroad alone. Instead, as a small but meaningful act of resistance, she chose to sit alone on a bench in a public space, enjoying a sweet potato by herself, before returning home. She chose the bench at the farthest edge of the estate deliberately, to avoid being recognised by neighbours. Her awkward seated posture and the way she faced away from passers-by showed a quiet caution, spatial modesty as a tentative, improvised form of unplanned interiority. It also materialised what Teston terms 'porous thresholds' as performative boundaries that are continually shaped and redefined through bodily movements and spatial interactions.[39] This emerging interiority was not brought about by architectural enclosure or deliberate planning. Instead, it arose from a web of constraints and disconnections: the domestic obligations #PTE20 could not refuse, the social

roles she embodied, and her emotional need to carve out experience from a setting from which she otherwise felt alienated. In this moment, she constructed a temporary interior within the public environment as a condition not prescriptively planned but claimed through situated agency.



Figure 03.
In a corner of Cheung On Estate, wooden dining chairs are carefully stored outside a residential building. Photograph: Xia Bi, 2023.

A similar form of emergent solitude was observed in Cheung On Estate. Many individuals sitting or lingering alone in public spaces near the residential towers were dressed in home clothes and slippers, subtly blending the domestic with the public. Their attire, usually confined to indoor spaces, extended into the shared spaces downstairs, suggesting a gentle expansion of the domestic boundary. At the edge of the estate, we observed some elderly people sitting on wooden dining chairs brought from home [Fig. 03]. After use, the chairs were neatly stored away in a corner to protect them from the sun. For many residents, the open spaces surrounding the estate served as a spatial extension of cramped domestic interiors, offering an opportunity to carry domestic practices into a more open and ventilated environment.

small sitting-out areas

In Hong Kong, sitting-out areas are small public parks and green spaces designed for rest and passive recreation. Also known as rest gardens or pocket gardens, they form the smallest units within the city's official open space network.[40] Scattered throughout densely built neighbourhoods, these modest spaces provide moments of respite from the city's intense pace. Despite their ubiquity, sitting-out areas are often overlooked in urban analysis due to their limited size, minimal programming, and sometimes temporary status. Nonetheless, they remain an essential yet understated part of Hong Kong's high-density urban landscape.

Ma Tau Wai Road/To Kwa Wan Road Garden is a relatively large sitting-out area located on the boundary between Hung Hom and To Kwa Wan. It occupies a triangular plot formed by the intersection of two major arterial roads. The D2 exit of the To Kwa Wan Mass Transit Railway (MTR) station is positioned at the northwestern edge of the site, and the surrounding area includes several busy bus interchanges. The garden itself is divided into three main zones. The southern section features a children's play area, while the eastern side is designated for activities for the elderly. A few two-seater benches with shelters surround these two areas. The central and northern zones, closer to the MTR exit and the public toilet, feature a series of orderly flowerbeds and three-seater benches arranged to form a resting area [Fig. 04]. Due to its proximity to multiple transport hubs, the garden naturally functions as a pathway for commuters. The continuous movement of people and the surrounding vehicular traffic bring a distinct sense of vitality and a fast-paced urban energy to this green space.

On a weekday evening, we encountered #MTG07, a man in his late thirties, sitting alone at one end of a three-seater bench. He was wearing noise-cancelling headphones and writing in a palm-sized notebook. A pair of boulder-climbing shoes hung from the backpack at his feet. 'I'm taking a seat here to slow down and get organised,' he said.[41] Soft, calming music leaked faintly from the headphones around his neck. 'I like to take some alone time to clear out my thoughts from work, so they don't come with me and interfere with my life.'[42] As the owner of two cafés, his

days were filled with a relentless stream of decisions about events, suppliers, and staffing. This moment of pause was a deliberate practice of detachment. 'The open sky helps me calm down,' he added.[43] 'Where I work and where I live are both surrounded by high-rises and, of course, the underground MTR. That's why this spot, with its wide open sky, is my favourite.'[44]



Figure 04.
Resting area in Ma Tau Wai Road/To Kwa Wan Road Garden, beside the D2 exit of To Kwa Wan MTR station. Photograph: Xia Bi, 2023.

Kowloon City District has many clusters of ageing residential buildings, especially in To Kwa Wan. While we were speaking with #MTG07, a steady stream of commuters passed by. Many office workers exited the To Kwa Wan MTR station, walking briskly in different directions on their way home after work. The continuous roar of traffic from the surrounding arterial roads and the mechanical hum of ventilation shafts near the station exit created a persistent layer of background noise.

Despite the surrounding noise and constant pedestrian flow, #MTG07 described the environment as 'nice and comfortable.'[45] 'This place does not stress me out,' he said. 'People are minding their own business: walking, sitting, exercising. No one cares about the other. It's not like parks at night when I was in New York.'[46] As he spoke, a woman who had been sitting alone nearby seemed to notice we were conducting an interview. She stood up and quietly moved to a more distant bench.

In Hong Kong, the everyday experience of living in a densely populated environment has fostered a collective tolerance of the presence of strangers. People are always conscious of others, yet there is an unspoken rule of non-interference. This establishes a social norm whereby strangers stay in close proximity without invading each other's personal space or interfering with their affairs. In public spaces, boundaries between individuals are clearly defined and carefully maintained. This was evident in the case of #MTG07, whose over-ear noise-cancelling headphones not only helped him focus on 'thought organising' but also served as a visible sign of disengagement from potential interaction.[47] Spending time alone in this garden every weekday evening established a boundary between his working identity and his personal life. Sitting quietly, listening to calming music, and writing served as a ritualised transition. The others around him did not disturb him but rather contributed to a feeling of comfort. At the same time, his awareness of the presence of other people provided a sense of safety.

The emergence of solitude and unplanned interiority in this context can be understood as the effect of a relational socio-material affordance. This affordance is co-constructed in an ecology through various interconnected actants: the bustle of fast-paced urban work life; Hong Kong's deeply embedded social norm of maintaining distance; people's tacit mutual awareness and non-interference in public space; the presence of an open sky, which offers a sense of perceptual release; the site's physical proximity to a major transit hub; and, crucially, #MTG07's own effort to mark a boundary between the stressful thoughts of work and his personal life.

solitude, public space, and unplanned interiority

These case studies reveal that emergent solitude in Hong Kong's public spaces cannot be viewed as a simple retreat from society or attributed solely to spatial features or personal choice. Instead, it is formed through a situated negotiation of multiple intersecting forces: cultural norms of non-

interference, institutionalised housing constraints, sensory sensitivities, and the affective atmospheres of particular urban micro-sites. These acts of solitude develop not in isolation but through relational socio-material conditions that shape and limit how people occupy and interpret space.

In both housing estates and sitting-out areas, individuals create interiorised experiences through bodily orientation and minimal but meaningful interactions with public spaces. The woman in Pak Tin Estate (#PTE20) practised solitude as a form of resistance and self-preservation within a stressful domestic environment that constrained her autonomy. Her method of creating physical and emotional space became a spatial improvisation. Similarly, the café owner at To Kwa Wan Road/ Ma Tau Wai Road Garden (#MTG07) ritualised daily transitions through ambient withdrawal. His solitude was not about avoiding others but about nurturing an ecosystem of shared silence and mutual distance. These examples demonstrate that unplanned interiority emerges when spatial practices extend beyond design intentions. The original design of Hong Kong's public spaces reflects a common view of publicness as visibility, sociability, and active participation. However, people tactically re-appropriate these spaces to create microzones of withdrawal, transforming public spaces into temporary interiors of resistance, transition, or recreation. These 'porous thresholds' are not fixed spatial types but delicate configurations sustained through atmospheric attunement and spatial modesty.[48] And they are co-created through attention, social conditions, and behavioural signals, such as turning away from pedestrian flow or wearing noise-cancelling headphones.

Revisiting Jacobs' 'eyes on the street' through this lens, what emerges is not only a mechanism of safety or surveillance but a condition that enables solitude.[49] The subtle awareness that others are nearby, while they carry on with their own affairs, creates an ambient social presence that allows individuals to retreat without fear. These eyes do not intrude, but they do provide stability. Further, like Attiwill's framing of interiority as collective individuation, the solitary practices documented in these case studies appear both highly individual and collective.[50] They constitute a shared response to broader urban ecologies. These ecologies are influenced by high-density urban stress, everyday life, and overexposure. These acts do not reclaim space in the name of individual sovereignty but instead reinforce a subtle, communal ethos of pause. From this perspective, public solitude is not a way to escape city life but an active form of resistance.

The relational affordance framework clarifies how such interiority arises, not merely as qualities of space or behaviour but as effects of entanglements between both. Building on the relational account of Stevens and others, this framework conceives affordances as emergent from ongoing interactions among people, material conditions, and cultural norms, rather than as fixed properties of the environment. Affordances reflect not only what the environment presents to the individual but also what the individual, in relation to others and the context, co-constructs within the milieu. In this context, emergent solitude is a socially embedded, materially situated, and temporally dependent production.

conclusion

This essay shows how solitude emerges in Hong Kong's dense urban public spaces not as a static psychological state or a designed outcome but as a relational and context-specific spatial event. Based on observation, ethnographic interviews, and spatial analysis, it demonstrates how people tactically re-appropriate sitting-out areas and public spaces in public housing estates to construct unplanned interiors. These unplanned interiors represent conditions of resistance and respite that occur within the relational ecological environmental context.

Framing these practices through the lens of relational socio-spatial affordances allows for a more nuanced understanding of how solitude is

enabled and sustained. Informed by assemblage thinking and public interiority, this essay demonstrates that solitude emerges as a socio-material assemblage, a co-constructed condition of attentional detachment and sensorial calibration within relational ecologies. These practices, although subtle and often unnoticed, reflect spatial agency and emotional self-regulation in constrained environments. Public spaces are not only 'third places'; they also require consideration in a broader framework of contextual conditions, including the domestic (first place) and work (second place) environments.[51]

Ultimately, the findings call for a rethinking of how public space is understood, designed, and valued. Instead of concentrating solely on sociability, it recognises the need to acknowledge solitary practices that stem from withdrawal, pause, and reflection. And it demonstrates that solitude is not the opposite of urban life but an adaptive response to it.

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author biographies

Xia Bi is a PhD candidate at the Public Design Lab, School of Design at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. His research focuses on rethinking public open space design in densely populated urban contexts from the perspective of positive solitude.

Kin Wai Michael Siu is Eric C. Yim Professor in Inclusive Design and Chair Professor of Public Design, the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. His research areas are in public design, policy and management of public design, user reception, inclusive design, and ergonomics.

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performative insertions: interior demonstrations and the critique of planned domesticity

Lorena Quintana
Universidad Torcuato Di Tella
0009-0006-5926-490X

Florencia Vetcher
New York Institute of Technology
0009-0008-2732-8141

abstract

Performative insertions are easily and temporary assembled additions to interiors in the form of screens, modules, and units that can transform the home and accommodate the evolving needs of occupants. Experimental *mises en scène*, they characterise emerging social and cultural roles that differ from the planned domestic roles embodied in the sites where they are inserted. While performative insertions are designed by architects and artists and are therefore not unplanned, they critique the planned domesticity that in the Western world has traditionally defined the home as a permanent, static dwelling for the nuclear family. Theatrical and expressive, performative insertions demonstrate alternative ways of living.

The following essay examines a collection of performative insertions from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, foregrounding their critique of the planned domesticity of their time. On one hand, earlier insertions critique the fixity of rooms in the home and their differentiated, gendered uses. They disrupt this planned domesticity by embodying newly modern and universal values: adaptability, mobility, efficiency, and hygiene. On the other hand, later insertions expand these critiques to question the planned permanence of the home and the social composition of the nuclear family. Their disruption embodies dwellings for people who share homes beyond the nuclear family: the homeless and urban dwellers on the move. Through their design, they bring up contemporary issues of precarity and marginalisation.

Beyond their demonstrative nature as prototypes, the analysis sheds light on their capacity for replicability. Some of the twentieth century cases did, in fact, go on to transform standard Western housing. The implementation and impact of the twenty-first-century cases, however, remain mediated by their experimental nature, leaving the question open as to whether they can foster new forms of community that go beyond the nuclear family, and that are detached from the permanence of the family home.

keywords

domesticity; temporary stability; performative; interior; demonstration

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introduction

A collection of interior assemblages that upend domestic environments is examined in this essay through the concept of performative insertions. Performative insertions are defined as easily assembled, temporary additions to interiors — screens, modules, and units — that reconfigure the home and respond to the shifting needs of its occupants. Conceived as experimental *mises en scène*, the cases discussed here are deemed performative insofar as they articulate emerging social and cultural roles that diverge from the planned domestic settings they occupy. Although fully designed by architects and artists, and therefore not unplanned, performative insertions nonetheless critique the forms of planned domesticity that have, in the Western world, long imagined the home as a stable, permanent dwelling for the nuclear family. Theatrical and expressive, performative insertions propose alternative modes of living within these planned domestic frameworks.

Domestic interiors embody the values of a specific place and time. In modern design and discourse of the twentieth century, for example, architecture scholars Beatriz Colomina and Mark Wigley identify that 'human needs' were addressed through design as defence, which in its most radical version 'attempts to reshape the human [...] carried out under the guise of reinforcing and protecting the human.'[1] Performative insertions operate as an added layer that critiques the normative and ideological dimensions embedded in the home where they are introduced. In the early twentieth century, performative insertions critique the fixity of rooms and their differentiated, gendered uses. Gerrit Rietveld's *Schröder House* (1924), for example, inserts mobile screens that embody interior flexibility and an integration of domestic spaces that was unplanned in homes where each room was considered separate. Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky's *Frankfurt Kitchen* (1926) is an early example of modular construction that embodies standardisation, efficiency, and hygiene, aiming to reduce the time women spent in the kitchen — an aspect largely unplanned for in pre-First World War housing, when women had not yet entered the European workforce on the scale they would in the decades that followed. Hannes Meyer's *Co-op Zimmer* (1926) is an exhibition scenography of a bedroom for a newly conceived universal mobile worker, an unplanned social role in the prevailing conception of urban workers as fixed to a single place.

In the twenty-first century, performative insertions expand these critiques to question the permanence of the home and cohabitation that is limited to the nuclear family. Andrés Jaque and the Office for Political Innovation's *Rolling Architecture* (2009), for example, is a series of units for people who share homes beyond the nuclear family, including students, migrants, and the recently divorced, who are often marginalised but can capitalise from their heterogeneity through proximity. Krzysztof Wodiczko's *Homeless Vehicle* (1989) makes the homeless of New York City visible, while Winfried Baumann's *Urban Nomads* (2001–2016) conceptualises a class of single and coupled urban dwellers on the move. These projects foreground how students, migrants, the recently divorced, the homeless, and the mobile remain unplanned for in single-family housing.

Analysed in a chronological continuum, the collection of performative insertions allows us to compare their qualities and their capacity to be reproduced. Insertions range from the mass-produced, built from readily available materials, to the singular and experimental unit. This qualitative range matches existing theorisations in the realm of prefabricated ready-made interiors, which describe three construction types: planar construction (the screen), modular construction (a standardised building block), and unit construction (the singular all-inclusive piece).[2] Understanding the degree of complexity of each performative insertion is useful as experimental assemblages allow for more radical innovation, while mass-produced assemblages aim for replicability in different environments and lower production costs at scale.

performative insertions in the early twentieth century: embodying changing domestic values

The increasing pace of cultural change in the early twentieth century offers an array of screens, modules, and units that critiqued and transformed the traditional home. The following section reviews a series of performative insertions that embody the social, economic, and ideological changes of the first half of the century. The review delves into the increasingly complex qualities of the insertions and highlights the ways they enabled modern transformations of traditional environments.

In the twentieth century, sliding screens, originally used in Japanese architecture, were introduced in Western interiors to define flexible spaces.[3] The sliding screen demonstrates the transformation of the static home as it becomes a sliding wall that integrates rooms that were planned to function separately. The *Schröder House* (1924) in Utrecht is an example of this transformation. Architect Gerrit Rietveld defines a flexible interior on the upper floor of the home with eight planes of sliding walls. Designed in collaboration with homeowner Truus Schröder, the house reflects the client's modern attitude to family life.[4] When slid into place, the walls divide the floor plan into six distinct rooms, including a hall, three bedrooms, a living/dining area, and a bathroom. When slid open, the rooms are integrated into a single space, disrupting the individual privacy of each bedroom and allowing agile changes to the function and use of each part of the floor plan. The architect's drawings suggest a piano fitted into the central area of the floor plan, enabling a large social gathering space superimposed with views of beds when the screens are open. In this case, the sliding walls are generic objects, unremarkable on their own, but they become performative and embody a changing domestic environment as they are inserted to enable alternate uses of the interior.

While the screens in the *Schröder House* embody flexibility and an integration of domestic spaces previously considered separate, Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky's *Frankfurt Kitchen* (1926) is a significant example of modular construction that embodies other emergent modern values: standardisation, efficiency, and hygiene. Comprising a number of modules equipped with a swivel stool, a gas stove, built-in aluminium storage with pouring pouts and measuring bars, a fold-down ironing board, an adjustable ceiling light, and a removable garbage drawer, the *Frankfurt Kitchen* was deployed along the walls of the kitchen area of new homes, following modern theories of workflow.[5] This was a radical redefinition of the kitchen: a more efficient workflow designed for low- and middle-class urban dwellers without servants, upholding the changing domestic values of women who were no longer confined to the space of the kitchen. This changing role of women was largely unplanned for in pre-First World War housing, when women had not yet entered the European workforce on the scale they would in the decades that followed. The kitchen's modularity allowed for adaptations to different architectural configurations and ultimately enabled an interior space that, in its usage, defied tradition. The *Frankfurt Kitchen*'s impact was such that it was assembled off-site and integrated into 10,000 housing units over five years in the New Frankfurt social housing project.[6]

Hannes Meyer's *Co-op Zimmer* (1923–1926) addresses the *Frankfurt Kitchen*'s aspiration towards standardisation, but in an expanded definition of modularity for a newly conceived mobile dweller. An exhibition scenography [Fig. 01], *Co-op Zimmer* is a stripped interior mock-up of a bedroom consisting of two walls and a floor surface made of white fabric, and a set of carefully positioned industrial objects: two folding wood and canvas chairs, a cot raised on conical supports, a phonograph placed on a collapsible stool, and a wall-mounted shelf holding jars with food. The objects have a standardised, generic quality to them, and in their placement conceptualise a design that is no longer a matter of taste but one of an economy of means.[7] In his shift towards a

Marxist stance, Meyer introduces this interior as a satisfier of 'true community', where the collective demand is for a standard product, manufactured internationally and displaying a uniform design. As he describes, these impersonal objects, 'apparatuses in the mechanisation of our daily life', allow for 'the semi-nomad of our modern productive system' the 'benefit of freedom of movement, economies, simplification and relaxation.'[8] The *Co-op Zimmer* project embodies a standardised domesticity that positively propositions minimal living for mobile workers, an unplanned form of habitation in the prevailing conception of modern urban workers as fixed to a single place. The lack of context or people inhabiting the photographs of this project emphasises its call for universality: a collapsible deployment of portable objects that can turn any space into a modern standard room. Thus, a key component of *Co-op Zimmer* is the agility with which the interior set-up could be acquired and deployed, enabling the conception of a normative mobile worker whose domestic requirements are entirely embodied in a set of interior objects. A radical proposal, it disrupts traditional family living, advocating for egalitarian and communal living instead. And yet, as radical as Meyer's project was, it's worth noting that it still maintains the traditional privacy of the individual bedroom.[9]



Figure 01.
Hannes Meyer, *Co-op Zimmer*, 1926. Image courtesy of Hannes Meyer-Archiv, Deutsches Architekturmuseum, Frankfurt am Main.

Hannes Meyer's conviction that objects can support a mechanised daily life raises the notion of mechanisation in the domestic realm. In a somewhat similar manner, Siegfried Giedion has investigated the meaning of mechanisation for interior objects in the context of nineteenth century American patent furniture. Tilting chairs for the modern office and the barber shop, sleeping cars for trains, automatic sofa spring-beds, and combinations of rocking chairs and cradles for the home are some examples of patented experimental furniture that was designed to perform different, separately planned functions in conjunction. Giedion explains that patent furniture tackled the problem of motion — a characteristic of furniture that exceeded domestic planning in the nineteenth century — and that the new inventions solved the problem of flexibility and adjustability to adapt to different postures of the human body.[10] At a deeper level, however, Giedion recognises that patent furniture arose from the demands of a growing, urban middle class that wished to bring comfort to minimum living spaces, and that mechanisation supplied not only a more efficient use of limited space, but also cheaper alternatives to handicraft furniture.[11]

Mechanised, convertible furniture also embodied new aesthetic values that allowed their acceptance to a certain degree in North America, but not in Europe. Giedion describes the 'sometimes grotesque effect of things promiscuously combined': a disturbance of 'normal proportions' that in the context of mechanised furniture was adopted for the sake of efficiency.[12] In an even stronger disturbance of separate functions, some pieces of furniture were designed to combine functions traditionally ascribed to different degrees of privacy, such as the *Parlor-Bed* (1891), a folding bed located in the parlour that dispensed with a separate bedroom, and the *Piano-Bed* (1866) that contained a bed, closets and a wash basin under a piano [Fig. 02]. These mixtures proved too much for the 'ruling taste' of the nineteenth century, which stifled their development.[13] The failure to adopt these mixtures demonstrates the limits of experimentation in delivering unplanned domestic interiors through performative insertions.

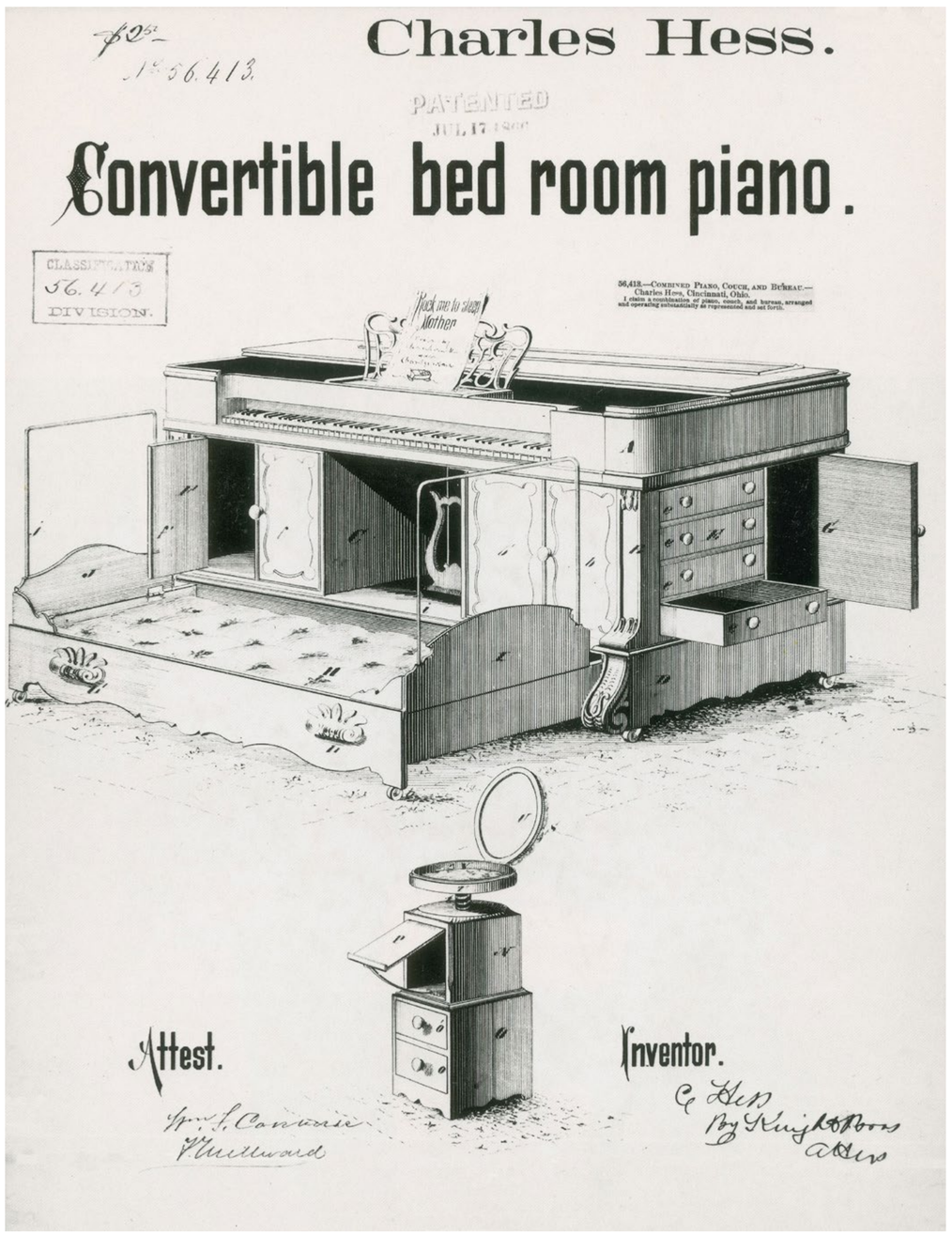


Figure 02.
Patent Drawing for Convertible Bed Room Piano, 17 July 1866. With permission from New York Public Library / Science Source.

Convertible furniture is an example of unit construction: a singular piece with a certain degree of complexity, ready to be installed in an existing room. Other examples of unit construction in the early twentieth century transformed domestic rooms into unplanned modern kitchens and bathrooms. For example, the *Hoosier Cabinet*, an early unit-based kitchen, was produced in the United States at the turn of the century: a freestanding, wardrobe-like object that housed appliances and cabinetry for dry goods.[14] As for bathrooms, Bertrand Goldberg's *Prefabricated Bathroom* (1947) exemplified an all-in-one unit that combined an industrial aesthetic, non-porous materials, and the precision of prefabricated technologies to address the modern preoccupation with hygiene.[15] Its built-in enclosure further enabled nested degrees of privacy: a new private bathroom within any existing room.

As a final case in this collection, the *raumplan* interiors of Adolf Loos of the 1910s and 1920s exemplify a combination of different kinds of insertions for a more ambiguous critique of the traditional interior. *Müller House* (1929–1930) exemplifies Loos' bourgeois home, composed of distinct rooms, each one filled with objects that embody a particular mode of habitation. Two performative insertions are particularly salient: the leather sofas in the men's smoking room and the raised seating area integrated into the women's room. The leather sofas are, on one hand, modular in their layout, and signal to the room's mode of habitation of face-to-face conversation through their placement, separated by the width of the mantelpiece. The seating area in the women's room, on the other hand, is part of a more sophisticated, singular assemblage consisting of an elevated floor level, steps, seats, shelves, and a ceiling made of wood that wraps continuously around the space. Beatriz Colomina has discussed the women's room as a more private area at the centre of the house in contrast to the men's public area, and reflects on the raised seating as a 'theatre box' that signifies an objectification of women, as well as the gendered power dynamics embodied in the house.[16] This is a case that portrays how an experimental object, the women's room seating assemblage, modern in its design, is ultimately a part of the architecture that reinforces the conventional gender values of early twentieth-century Viennese bourgeoisie. It is therefore essential to consider the usage of interior objects: the way they function, beyond their appearance, to gauge the extent to which they critique and transform planned domesticity.

The projects reviewed so far reveal a range of interior assemblages that reflect the shifting domestic values of twentieth-century modernism. Adaptability, mobility, efficiency, hygiene, Marxist radicality, and bourgeois convention: different modern values found expression in different kinds of interiors. Classifying them into screens, modules, and units helps clarify their potential for replication. The fact that sliding screens and

modular construction reshaped Western housing far more than convertible furniture or devices like Loos' 'theatre box' underscores the transformative power of mass-produced, replicable elements.

performative insertions for people sharing homes beyond the nuclear family: an alternative domesticity in andrés jaque's *rolling architecture* (2009)

Performative insertions in the twenty-first century embody a different set of issues: mobility, precarity, and homelessness. Their degree of experimentation exceeds the propriety that limited interior assemblages a century earlier. In contrast to their early twentieth-century counterparts, contemporary performative insertions no longer address a universal modern dweller, such as the gendered bourgeois or the Marxist mobile worker, but instead address heterogeneous social roles that have been unplanned for in fixed, single-family homes prevalent in the Western world.

Rolling Architecture (2009) is a speculative project and prototype by architect Andrés Jaque and his design and research studio, the Office for Political Innovation, that proposes an interior architecture for individuals who move and share homes beyond the traditional nuclear family: students, temporary workers, migrants, travellers, as well as recently divorced and elderly people.[17] Beyond seeking an alternative domesticity, members of these mobile groups are varied and often excluded from planned neighbourhoods comprised of single-family homes. Their range of variability is significant as it exceeds the Marxist single conception of universal mobile workers. Unlike Hannes Meyer's standard private bedroom for minimal living previously discussed, Andrés Jaque proposes an interior that articulates social interactions while highlighting the differences between people.

Alternatively titled *Rolling House for a Rolling Society*, or *Casa Rodante para una Sociedad Rodante* in Spanish, the title is a play on the Spanish term for mobile home: *casa rodante*, where *rodante* is not translated to English as *mobile* but as *rolling*. The title avoids the connotations of the mobile home as a consumer product planned and built for the leisure of nuclear families on the open road, as it has been primarily conceived in the United States.[18] Instead, the rolling quality of the project connotes an alternative, unplanned mobility beyond nuclear family setups: people rolling along in life, possibly high-rolling on an opportunity for a different life. This interpretation reflecting the possibility of lifestyles beyond the normative nuclear family is consistent with Jaque's rejection of the notion of home, distancing his project from an idea of coziness and belonging. Jaque has also acknowledged that the title of the project refers to the mass-produced rolling blinds that are the main components of the project.[19]

As a departure point for *Rolling Architecture*, Jaque and his team conducted fieldwork that recorded and analysed over a hundred testimonies of people who have lived in shared apartments around the world, from which the researchers distilled three principles of shared living. First, the 'public/private dialectic' loses relevance in shared houses, as the living room becomes a politicised and controversial environment in permanent dispute.[20] Second, the house is no longer a familiar home, but 'an exotic background for an uncertain lifestyle', where people are confronted with difference.[21] Third, access to usage and adaptability are more important than specialised design, functionalism, or uniformity.[22] Beyond these three principles, Jaque claims that mobile people are not solely 'vulnerable to weather, personal integrity or property maintenance, but also to social exclusion, disconnection and operational outdating.'[23] A house that upends traditional homeliness in favour of a shared space means, for Jaque, 'the place where one encounters otherness and builds up association within it', and ultimately, 'the rapid obtainment of relational capital.'[24]

The social exclusion that contemporary mobile people face is addressed through the design of the project. The *Rolling Architecture* prototype is a

series of insertions deployed in an undifferentiated, continuous interior space.[25] In this setup, the interior is not subdivided into rooms for public or private use but is instead filled with assemblages that address different functions, some of which are enclosed in blinds and awnings that, when drawn closed, temporarily yield private spaces. The insertions are of two kinds. On one hand, there are three experimental units: the 'Rolling Plastic Nest', a pod-like sleeping retractable awning enclosure that also functions as a greenhouse and includes a transportable trunk wardrobe; the 'Rolling Hut for the Rolling Intimacy', similar to the Nest but without the wardrobe and with more insulation in its enclosure; and the unenclosed 'Rolling Tub', a bathing tub elevated on stilts which couples 'water enjoyment' with 'a community of vegetal pets' by delivering wastewater from the tub to planters at the level below.[26] These insertions are meant to question the expectations of what constitutes a domestic environment. If Jaque admits that each flatmate must be assigned a 'Rolling Plastic Nest', this is not meant to be a private space, but a space to access 'specialised socialisations', store belongings, and have a greenhouse to nurture.[27] On the other hand, the project also includes mass-produced, widely available materials such as blinds and windows: generic insertions that operate as screens and become performative as they yield different degrees of opacity and spatial separation. When drawn closed, the screens create private spaces around bathrooms and living rooms, but only as temporary enclosures that don't correspond to the planned notion of permanent privacy within a home.

Both the experimental units and the screens are built from mass-produced parts. The aluminium retractable rolling blinds and awnings the architect details from Gradhermetic and Hunter Douglas refer to multinational companies that manufacture products through decentralised networks on a scale for mass consumption, making them low-cost and readily available. Used extensively since the postwar boom, they are the 'residential infrastructure' that *Rolling Architecture* defamiliarises.[28] The project uses these generic parts to fulfil alternative purposes from the ones they were designed for (like exterior wall cladding or sunscreens), rendering the domestic settings unfamiliar, and making an aesthetic claim in favour of them as 'peripheral products' that are 'scorned' by architects, but that deliver on availability and adaptability over specialisation.[29] Beyond the low cost of the generic parts, the point is, for Jaque, to transform domestic architecture 'from the protective and familiar to the rearticulative and associative', an unplanned architecture that 'results in iterative and uncoordinated action'.[30] This is, for Jaque, the way architecture operates politically. The project does not modify or define behaviours according to planned patterns but rather contributes to articulating social structures and proposing alternative social networks.[31]

While Jaque's research investigated the testimonies of migrants of different ages and global backgrounds, the project's construction in the context of an exhibition was photographed with young performers, suggesting the implementation of *Rolling Architecture* as student housing or collective living among people of a similar age [Fig. 03]. Designed for the Erasmus Programme of academic exchange for students and workers, financed by the European Union before the 2009 economic crisis, it does not address the realities of multigenerational renters, including children, the elderly, and the disabled. It is also important to highlight the reduced international cooperation and less permeable borders after 2009 that have increased housing inequality and contempt towards migrants. The value of *Rolling Architecture* ultimately lies in destigmatising domestic life beyond the nuclear family, and in the notion that mobile groups, often marginalised, can capitalise from their heterogeneity, even in a limited capacity within a certain age range.

making mobile people visible: krzysztof wodiczko's *homeless vehicle* (1989) and winfried baumann's *urban nomads* (2001–2016)

Destigmatising mobile people, particularly the homeless, has been proposed by Krzysztof Wodiczko in the *Homeless Vehicle* (1989), and more recently by Winfried Baumann's *Urban Nomads* series (2001–2016). Wodiczko proposes a 'functional and symbolic program' for the *Homeless Vehicle*: a demonstration meant as a starting point to foster collaboration between designers and homeless people who have been historically unplanned for in cities, to the degree of rendering them invisible.[32] A convertible cart prototype [Fig 04.], the *Homeless Vehicle* accommodates sleeping, washing, and storage through folding parts and different degrees of opacity and translucency of a mobile metal structure that can fit a single person inside. Meant to be used outdoors, the aim of this unit is both to fulfil the needs of homeless people for a means of transportation and shelter, as well as to make them visible and legitimise their status in New York City, where the project was designed with the input and collaboration of homeless individuals.[33] The *Homeless Vehicle* extends the genealogy of convertible furniture put forward by Sigfried Giedion, but it overcomes nineteenth-century propriety limiting the critique of planned domesticity. Wodiczko responds to homelessness as a social scandal through 'scandalous functionalism', a shocking symbolism that translates to a form that resembles a weapon: a metal nose (a folded washbasin) capping a bullet-shaped enclosure portraying the vehicle as an act of resistance for the disenfranchised.[34]

Beyond critiquing planned domesticity, Jaque's *Rolling Architecture* and Wodiczko's *Homeless Vehicle* tackle the problem of mobility and community. In these projects, the question remains whether, and to what extent, they can foster forms of community detached from the permanence of the family home. While community has been defined as a predecessor of society



Figure 03.
Andrés Jaque / Office for Political Innovation, *Rolling House for the Rolling Society*, 2009. Photograph: Miguel de Guzmán. Image courtesy of Andrés Jaque / Office for Political Innovation.



Figure 04.
Krzysztof Wodiczko, *Homeless Vehicle*, New York City, 1988. Photograph copyright: Krzysztof Wodiczko. Image courtesy of the artist and Galerie Lelong NY.

in terms of scale and organisation, and society as a predominant form of social organisation, community has also been theorised as a tool of rejection when the larger society fails to deliver on its promises.[35] In response to the failures of society towards migrants and the homeless, Jaque's *Rolling Architecture* proposes a form of experimental, communal association through proximity, while Wodiczko's *Homeless Vehicle* takes an openly political stance and serves as a tool of protest against the invisibility of the homeless in New York City in the 1980s. Wodiczko's proposition of 'assembling vehicles in groups as collective habitats or defensive

encampments against police harassment' suggests an unplanned, emergent mobile community of resistance that materialises through the gathering of people with *Homeless Vehicles*.[36]

Winfried Baumann's *Urban Nomads* project does not propose an openly political stance, although Baumann has been explicit in his interest not only in social aspects in his artistic work, but also in mobility and social changes as ongoing processes, and in his work occupying a space between art and a social project.[37] In line with Jaque and Wodiczko, *Urban Nomads* expands the functional and aesthetic possibilities of alternative domesticities through thirty-five objects that address the needs of the homeless for shelter and storage. Originally comprised of the *Instant Housing* series of fifteen prototypes, the project expands into different systems such as the *Instant Cooking*, *Instant Exhibition*, and *Dresscode* iterations to respond to the situations of people who do not live within firmly established structures, addressing mobile groups beyond the homeless.[38]

Baumann's portable units for single persons or couples — pushed, carried, or attached to vehicles — combine streamlined forms, refined materials (wood, aluminium, acrylic, synthetic fabrics), and bright colours to project a cool aesthetic that appeals to both travellers and the fashion-forward, reframing homelessness within a broader design debate. This reading is based on the objects' quality and presentation: photographed uninhabited against a blank white background [Figs. 05 and 06]. This abstraction recalls Hannes Meyer's *Co-op Zimmer*, yet, like Jaque's *Rolling Architecture*, Baumann's *Urban Nomads* make visible an alternative form of domesticity through design objects that address more heterogeneous mobile people.



Figure 05.
Winfried Baumann, *Urban Nomads* series. 'Instant Housing H-Klasse H-4 Cabin LZ1', 2005. Image courtesy of Winfried Baumann.



Figure 06.
Winfried Baumann, *Urban Nomads* series. 'Instant Housing WBF 240-Bike SLS', 2008. Image courtesy of Winfried Baumann.



Figure 07.
Atelier OPA, *Kenchikukagu Architectural Furniture*, 2008. Image courtesy of Atelier OPA.

manufacturing performative insertions at scale: atelier opa's *kenchikukagu* (2008)

An attempt to manufacture performative insertions at scale has been proposed by Atelier OPA, a Tokyo-based design practice that has developed *Kenchikukagu* or *Architectural Furniture* since 2008. *Kenchikukagu* is a series of three experimental, built-in units: a mobile kitchen, a foldaway guest room, and a foldaway office [Fig. 07]. Made of steel and aluminium, when closed, the units appear like oversized, sleek pieces of luggage on wheels that can be moved and operated by a single person. Unlike Jaque's *Rolling Architecture*, the emphasis of *Kenchikukagu* as presented by the designers is not placed on enhancing social interactions in the domestic space. Instead, they focus on the portability, convertibility, and minimal footprint of the units, highlighting their capacity to quickly turn any interior into a kitchen, a bedroom, or an office temporarily while occupying the least amount of space. A twenty-first century experimental unit that combines the portability and modularity of Hannes Meyer's *Co-op Zimmer*, the convertibility of the mechanised furniture described by Sigfried Giedion, and the sleekness of unit construction, the minimal dimensions of the *Kenchikukagu* reflect the small dimensions of Tokyo apartments and dense urban living.

The sleek unit construction of *Kenchikukagu* resumes, at an interiors scale, an iconic Japanese Metabolist project: the *Nakagin Capsule Tower* (1972) by architect Kisho Kurokawa.[39] Kurokawa's project consisted of prefabricated capsules, like Bertrand Goldberg's *Prefabricated Bathroom*, which had addressed an industrial aesthetic through the precision of prefabrication almost thirty years earlier. But the Nakagin capsules were part of a larger, more radical redefinition of architecture in Japan.[40] In Tokyo, the Nakagin capsules — plugged into the building core and theoretically removable — heralded an era of high-tech seamless interiors mechanically integrated with their host architecture, and potentially interchangeable within a broader system of compatible architectural infrastructures that would expand beyond a single building. The Nakagin capsule, a streamlined dwelling pod inspired by the Space Age of the 1960s, intended to replace family living with a system centred

on mobile individuals: it was 'a terminal for the networked cosmopolitan nomad.'[41] Beyond the *Nakagin Capsule Tower*'s eventual failure and demolition, the project served as a test case for the company that commercialised it, Kotobuki Seating Co. Ltd, that since 1979 produced 'sleep capsules' for hotels and dormitories.[42]

Compared to the utopian and expansive ambition of the *Nakagin Capsule Tower*, Atelier OPA's *Kenchikukagu* operates at a strictly interiors scale; however, it shares the same objective of large-scale manufacturing and commercialisation. Since 2008, different iterations of *Kenchikukagu* have been commercialised in Japan and Europe, manufactured by Yodoko Plus, a company that stems from Yodogawa Steel Works, Ltd, an iron and steel manufacturer in Japan since 1935, which has produced exterior products such as garages and warehouses since 1970.[43] The manufacture of *Kenchikukagu* through a steel company that produces generic parts echoes Andrés Jaque's preference for mass-produced materials that are widely available, adaptable, and outside of architects' traditional aesthetic repertoires.

conclusion

Performative insertions have historically embodied emergent social and cultural values, questioning the planned domesticity of static, single-family homes, and enabling unplanned social roles and forms of cohabitation. The cases reviewed convey how temporary or non-static insertions critique and transform the planned occupancy of dwellings. The theatricality of their presentation as demonstrations, exhibitions, and scenography foregrounds their performative quality. Classified as screens, modules, and all-encompassing units, their degree of complexity sheds light on the potential of performative insertions to be replicated in different environments and produced at scale.

During the early twentieth century, performative insertions embodied modern values: adaptability, mobility, efficiency, and hygiene. Their degree of experimentality, however, was limited by ruling tastes and bourgeois conventions. They precede twenty-first-century insertions that have exceeded the propriety that limited experimentation a century earlier. Twenty-first-century performative insertions further address mobile people who share homes beyond the nuclear family. In contrast to early twentieth-century cases, contemporary performative insertions no longer aspire to universality but instead embody a range of different needs and desires: from the need for shelter and storage, to the desire to build 'relational capital' by enhancing social interactions, and the need to be acknowledged as a community. Andrés Jaque's *Rolling Architecture*, Krzysztof Wodiczko's *Homeless Vehicle*, and Winfried Baumann's *Urban Nomads* are prototypes that make mobile communities visible and expand the functional and aesthetic possibilities of objects that embody their values. In these cases, the question remains whether alternative domestic setups can foster forms of community detached from the permanence of the family home. Unlike the early twentieth-century examples reviewed, inhabited experiments that went on to transform standard Western housing, the theoretical nature of twenty-first-century cases limits their engagement with the lived realities of mobile people and the kinds of community they might foster. While planned domesticity continues to be questioned and redefined in experimental and artistic projects for mobile people, the care of children and the elderly remains unaddressed.

Atelier OPA's *Kenchikukagu*, manufactured at scale, demonstrates a broader acceptance of performative insertions, particularly in urban contexts where space is scarce. Examining the usage of the *Kenchikukagu* can reveal whether it generates new forms of community, for example, by fostering multigenerational households or integrating short-term residents into community life. New forms of community that address contemporary issues of mobility, precarity, and access to housing within existing structures can be evaluated once performative insertions are set in place.

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author biography

Lorena Quintana is a lecturer in architecture at Universidad Torcuato Di Tella. In collaboration with architectural practices in New York, Santiago de Chile, and Buenos Aires, she has developed platforms for architectural communication as a designer, editor, and writer. Her current research concerns nomadic forms of living and the history of architectural criticism.

Florencia Vetcher is Assistant Professor and Chair of the Department of Interior Design at New York Institute of Technology. Her teaching focuses on urban micro-living, adaptive reuse, and issues of mobility and privacy in contemporary living. She runs the design practice vetcher-breidfjord with partner Sigfus Breidfjord, working on small-scale projects in the United States, Argentina, and Iceland.

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‘walls to live behind’: insights into spatial realities of forced displacement and activist potential of contemporary scenography

Nevena Mrdjenovic
University of Technology Sydney
0000-0001-8548-0186

abstract

This essay investigates the liminal stages of inhabitation that emerge in the immediate aftermath of forced displacement — unplanned and improvised domestic sites positioned between ‘home-loss’ and ‘home-making’. It responds to the grievous statistics of displaced individuals around the globe and addresses the ongoing neglect of these critical sites in human experience in contemporary discourses.

Drawing on spatial, cultural, and political theory, the essay unpacks ruptured domestic experiences and defines them as forms of spatial and temporal shock. Violence in war is commonly enacted through speed; thus, survival unfolds in conditions of radical disorientation. In the immediate aftermath of displacement, one’s ability to enact home-making practices is completely constrained. This ‘living in the interim’ is defined as a performative condition in which spatial agency is expressed through gestures of survival. From this perspective, the zones of refuge people inhabit are investigated and presented as scenographic sites in which material improvisation, embodied adaptation, and human agency are actively performed.

The essay employs a scenographic inquiry, which allows for a unique hybridisation of spatial, temporal, and performative insights. Scenography here emerges as an activist lens and a tool, and develops a hybrid methodology that combines testimonial analysis and speculative experimentation. Two interrelated projects, ‘Spatial Triage’ (2021) and ‘In the middle of NOWhere’ (2023), offer an embodied form of witnessing and re-imaging of how refugees navigate temporary sites that are materially and symbolically suspended between past and future. Positioned within the expanded spatial discourse, scenography is capable of exposing the politics of domestic precarity and new spatial taxonomies of care, continuity, and resilience in the face of systemic violence and uprooting.

keywords

displacement; home; temporary interior; scenography; activism

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introduction

In mid-2025 more than 122 million people are forcibly displaced from their homes, marking the highest number in recorded history.[1] Behind these grievous statistics are people for whom returning home is impossible. Their homes remain in unsafe, conflict-ridden zones, have been heavily damaged, or destroyed in ethnic clashes. Without exception, wars claim atrocious numbers of lives and leave a devastating legacy of psychological distress and deeply inscribed trauma. Notably, all global conflicts also include the violent destruction of homes. Attacks on homes have been prominent throughout history and remain a feature of currently conflicted zones in Palestine, Ukraine, and beyond. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reports that since the escalation of the conflicts in October 2023 until May 2025 over 92 per cent of homes in the Gaza Strip have been destroyed.[2] In roughly the same period, in Ukraine, 2.5 million homes have been damaged and destroyed — contributing to more than 10.6 million Ukrainians being forcibly displaced.[3] Similar patterns of systemic war against domestic architecture and mass displacement are reported across other active conflicts in Sudan, Myanmar, Ethiopia, Syria, Yemen, Haiti, and Sahel.

Forced displacement means abrupt separation of people from their common practices, familiar environments, and sites that are inscribed with a sense of personal and collective identity. In the initial moments of displacement, when a home becomes a site of danger, people are not instantly in search of a new place of belonging. Their first point of arrival is rarely chosen but is imposed based on what is immediately available: camps, collective shelters, abandoned buildings, informal settlements, and, for those ‘fortunate enough’, homes of people they know. Commonly, these unplanned refuges are characterised by material scarcity, regulatory ambiguity, and physical and psychological adaptability. The process and complexity of home-making following forced displacement have been studied from various scholarly perspectives. However, most discourses, including the spatial one, have largely overlooked the initial stage of displacement — one that occurs immediately after people leave their homes. This period is marked by spatial improvisations and suspension of normative social structures in which people, their identities, and belongings are all held in precarious flux. For many refugees, it is precisely this moment when ‘they’re stuck in a present they do not want to inhabit, awaiting a future they cannot reach, a future that is often unpredictable and uncertain’ that defines the traumatic nature of forced uprooting.[4]

This essay foregrounds this fleeting, but formative period immediately after displacement. It employs a scenographic lens aiming to foster a unique hybridisation of spatial and performative insights. Scenographic approach to space is established on concepts of inhabitation, embodiment, transformation, atmosphere, and the relational dynamics of space. Contemporary scenography is ‘(not a thing to be looked at, but) a way of looking’ and is here employed as ‘a tool, a system, a process, and generative organism for understanding the complex environment in which we live.’[5] Its frameworks allow for an exploration of the unplanned interiors of displacement as sites in which vulnerability, adaptability, and agency are materially and immaterially negotiated. The central aim of this essay is to reposition the provisional inhabitation as a critical site of inquiry within spatial, humanitarian, and cultural discourses. It presents a two-act scenographic experiment, ‘Spatial Triage’ (2021) and ‘In the middle of NOWhere’ (2023), on which it establishes a multi-layered investigation into realities of forced displacement and introduces an activist potential of scenography. This activist potential is to raise awareness, provoke dialogue, and inspire action. The two experiments signal activism by moving towards actively incorporating social change as a central focus of their design and spatial methodology. Within them, scenography is utilised as a lens and a tool. As an activist lens, scenography allows us to view the liminal spaces in question from a perspective engaged in social

and political change; as a tool, it enables a powerful utilisation of design and performance strategies to engage with real social and political issues.

for 'the theatre that has survived the theatre'

In his manifesto 'The Theatre is Dead' (1926), Austrian-American scenographer, architect, and scholar Frederick Kiesler (1890–1965) offers a provocation: 'We are working for the theatre that has survived the theatre.'[6] Similarly, in her contribution to *The Routledge Companion to Contemporary European Theatre and Performance*, New Zealand architect, scholar, and visual artist Dorita Hannah claims, 'Theatre has "left the building", [...] making way for spatial performativity.'[7] Hannah urges scenographers to confront how global crisis, including ongoing ethnic conflicts, invades our spaces and imaginations. In the past few years alone, since the seeds of this research were laid, the dramatic nature of everyday experience has transcended the theatricality of staged performances. The heightened sense of theatricality stems from the continuous global state of uncertainty, tension, and intensified conflicts, leading to a collective state of globally prolonged 'dramatic suspense.'[8] We are, therefore, working for the *theatricality* that persists in fractured geographies of war, where we bear witness to real lives caught in suspense.

Contemporary scenography has long escaped the boundaries of theatrical prosceniums. Leading professors, Joslin McKinney and Scott Palmer, tell us it '[...] can happen anywhere', and importantly they add, '[...] the role of the scenographer is often now blurred with that of [...] the activist.'[9] Finnish scenographer Laura Grondahl adds to this argument by explaining that expanded scenography is 'increasingly conceived of as an event, experience, and action.'[10] Further, transdisciplinary scenographer, performance maker, and researcher Louise Ann Wilson proposes that 'when it embraces site, life-event and participant, [...] scenography becomes a catalyst for personal, social and cultural change.'[11] Wilson builds her socially engaged scenographic framework as an extension of the concept of 'scenography with purpose' developed by contemporary theatre, performance, and technology professor Christopher Baugh.[12] In her book *Sites of Transformation: Applied and Socially Engaged Scenography in Rural Landscapes*, Wilson uses a series of case studies to define scenography as a distinctive type of applied art and performance practice that seeks tangible, therapeutic, and transformative real-world outcomes.[13] Importantly, this framework gives voice to marginalised individuals, groups, and communities. Baugh defines 'scenography with purpose' as a practice that engages directly with a community and becomes the author of independent works of and beyond performance: 'its skills and technologies are being used to address, through activism and intervention, issues of ecology as broadly as community memory, national identity, globalisation as well as making scenographic responses to asylum, urbanisation, and displacement.'[14]

homes under siege: domesticity in suspense

As global ethnic conflicts wear on, they are increasingly prone to greater extremes, not only in military strategy, but also in the symbolic violence enacted against cultural and domestic life. Violence in war is conventionally associated with physical attacks and territorial conquest. Often, war and violence are even treated as synonyms. One of the most influential political theorists of the twentieth century, Hannah Arendt (1906–1975), reminds us that violence is 'a phenomenon in its own right', and should be unpacked beyond its immediate material impacts.[15] This encompasses physical, psychological, and emotional harm inflicted upon individuals and their environments. The harm echoes in the lives of the attacked long after the actual act has taken place. This phenomenon is most strikingly manifested through the systemic violence against domestic dwellings. Its traces and effects are commonly overlooked, implying these are accidental or collateral damage. However, ongoing conflicts prove these actions are orchestrated strategies, developed within broader

practices of cultural erasure and ethnic cleansing.

Domestic sites are not inherently political, but they become politicised through their symbolic associations — as markers of cultural identity, personal and collective memory, community resilience, and continuity. In times of conflict, homes become more than dwelling sites and signify the presence of a community marked for erasure. Arendt argues that domestic space *is* essentially political as it 'provides the canvas for all social life.'[16] Destroying the 'canvas' is an attack that ruptures personal, social, and cultural continuity. Echoing this sentiment, contemporary architect and scholar Bernard Tschumi asserts that 'architecture is defined by the actions it witnesses, as much as by the enclosure of its walls.'[17] Here, architecture is conceived as a simultaneity of space and event, inseparably bound to the social relations and lived experiences it accommodates. From this perspective, the destruction of homes is not merely a loss of physical structures. It is an attack on the lived narratives and daily rituals that constitute human dwelling. The destruction of domestic architecture marks the end of a familiar spatial order and the beginning of profoundly complex physical and psychological notions of displacement. When homes are obliterated, what follows is not a process of re-building. Instead, this marks a period of improvisation of domestic life under conditions of loss, trauma, uncertainty, and fear.

French cultural theorist Paul Virilio opens his book *Art as Far as the Eye Can See* with a quote from a philosopher Albert Camus (1913–1960): 'The seventeenth century was the century of mathematics, the eighteenth, of the physical sciences, and the nineteenth, of biology. The twentieth century is the century of fear.'[18] Taking this as a departure point, Virilio expresses his own view of the current condition where '[…] fear has become a dominant culture, if not an art — an art contemporary with mutually assured destruction.'[19] This resonates soundly with the present experience when displacement is not only a humanitarian emergency, but a consequence of sustained assaults on domestic life. Virilio acknowledges Arendt as a major post-war thinker, assigning particular significance to her conceptualisation of the 'phenomenon of terror', embracing it as 'the realisation of the law of movement', suggesting that any relationship to terror is interwoven with life and speed.[20]

Virilio interprets Arendt's 'law of movement' as 'the law of speed': 'it is clear that that terror is not simply an emotional and psychological phenomenon but a physical one as well in the sense of physics and kinetics, a phenomenon related to what I call the "acceleration of reality".'[21] He coins the term 'dromology', which originates from the Greek 'dromos' or 'racecourse', and thereby interprets the world and our existence as a product of speed and its logic.[22] For Virilio, this is crucial for understanding the structure of societies and warfare. Within this, the concepts of speed, terror, surprise, and spectacle emerge as highly significant. Precisely, most homes are destroyed in brief military strikes that embody these exact principles. While the overall military operation can be sustained and systematic, the actual act of destruction (airstrike, drone strike, or a military operation) is typically very fast, occurring in minutes or even seconds. Examples of this can be found in both contemporary and historic conflicts. In Gaza or Ukraine, a targeted airstrike on a residential building may occur within seconds, instantly wiping out decades of domestic histories. Historically, the break-up of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFR Yugoslavia) also documents military operations organised on these principles. The Croatian operations 'Flash' (May 1995) and 'Storm' (August 1995) occurred over a day or two and were conducted to cleanse the terrain of ethnic minorities in the shortest possible time. In war, the urge for speed is a key part of the strategy, which creates psychological disturbance, shock, and disorientation in those affected.

This acceleration of reality through destruction generates profound cognitive and psychological disorientation. It is a tactic through which uncertainty

becomes structurally imposed. Catherine Brun, a human geographer whose work centres primarily on displacement, adds, 'uncertainty is not only a characteristic of displacement but becomes a governing principle of everyday life in displacement.'[23] Forcibly displaced individuals lose their homes within minutes, finding themselves thrust into homelessness before they have even grasped the unfolding violence. This rupture is traumatic and affects one's capacity to plan or act with agency. Speed is, therefore, not neutral, but is a form of domination. This governing principle is lived through the body, but also through the improvised acts of domestic endurance in the first interiors people inhabit.

living in the interim: between home-loss and home-making

Housing is a basic human right, recognised in Article 25 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.[24] Contemporary interior architecture scholar Tasoulla Hadjiyanni reminds us that, 'home is not only a physical space, but a place of identity, control, and connection.'[25] Hadjiyanni's work extensively explores marginalised communities, including those forcibly displaced, and focuses on the ways people negotiate identity, belonging, and resilience through everyday spatial practices. She argues for a distinction between the concepts of housing and home-making — defining housing as a physical and structural provision of shelter, and home-making as the personal, cultural, and emotional process of creating a sense of belonging. Housing thus involves meeting pragmatic needs, while home-making embodies acts of identity, memory, and ritual that unfold over a longer period through repetition, familiar acts, memory, and emotional engagement. Central to Hadjiyanni's argument is a concept of 'oikophilia', derived from the Greek 'oikos' meaning 'home' and 'philia' meaning 'love' — in its literal sense it translates as 'the love of home'. In her definition of 'oikophilia', Hadjiyanni refers to the universal human need to form deep attachments to space, which is essential to wellbeing, continuity, and the restoration of agency following displacement.[26] She equals home-making processes to meaning-making processes and Illustrates this by defining homes as settings through which 'people create order, shape intentions, form dreams, [...] and relish in their rights.'[27]

Jelena Golubovic and Parin Dossa, Canadian scholars specialising in anthropology of violence and displacement, support Hadjiyanni's definition of home-making and explain that the term itself indicates a process: 'it implies that homes are not simply stepped into, ready-made, and nor are they simply stepped out of: they are cultivated and continuously reimagined in the context of everyday life.'[28] An ethnographer of migration and home-making, Luis Eduardo Perez Murcia further deepens this argument by saying that while displaced people may be physically sheltered, they often remain 'existentially homeless' and estranged from the complex emotional and temporal foundations of home.[29] For Murcia, home-making in displacement is not about spatial recovery, but rather about restoring continuity, meaning, and a sense of future. Croatian ethnologist Jasna Capo also resists a simplified linear trajectory from displacement to home-making. Her theories align with Murcia's in saying that forcibly displaced people live in 'multi-temporal presents' — in which past trauma, present instability, and future uncertainty coexist.[30] From Capo's perspective, home is also not a fixed place, but a set of practices, memories, and relational attachments. Golubovic and Dossa extend this argument by defining home as a 'place that evokes the rhythms, sights and sounds of everyday life [...] It is a place that enables one to imagine a future.'[31]

In the immediate aftermath of displacement, one's ability to enact home-making practices is profoundly constrained. This process is haunted by loss and ambiguity. In acceleration-induced loss, it is not only physical displacement that affects one's ability to build a new sense of belonging, but also an acute temporal disorientation. The speed with which one is violently displaced from home under profoundly traumatic circumstances

makes coherent spatial and emotional response nearly impossible. This disorientation highlights the need for immediate survival strategies, rather than processes of home-making. It also foregrounds the necessity of alternative spatial frameworks, such as scenography, to make sense of how people reorient, adapt, and endure in unplanned interiors shaped by trauma.

scenography as an analytical and political act: act one: unpacking *mise-en-scènes* of survival

The conceptual seeds of this essay lie in fifteen letters written by refugees from the former SFR Yugoslavia. The letters were received as part of a seminar, 'Between Migration and Stasis: Case Studies' (2021), which examined the material and immaterial aftermath of war in this region (1991–1999). This was an online event, organised as a follow-up to the *International Federation for Theatre Research World Congress* (IFTR), which took place in Belgrade in 2018, under the official title 'Theatre and Migration: Theatre, Nation, and Identity: Between Migration and Stasis'. The seminar took place over three days and brought together scholars and practitioners from theatre, spatial, performance, cultural, and media studies. Unique to all participants was that they were all directly or indirectly affected by the ethnic conflicts in the former SFR Yugoslavia in the early 1990s.

A panel titled 'Spatial Triage' was held on the second day of the seminar and was conceived as the first stage of a scenographic investigation into spatial realities of forced displacement. This was a research-based workshop, which engaged with written testimonies of refugees from the region and examined the improvised interiors as spaces of physical and psychological endurance. It was developed on the grounds of 'forensic scenography', a method of spatial inquiry that inverted scenographic processes and questioned the meanings and consequences of attacks on domestic dwellings during the conflicts in the 1990s.[32] This workshop foregrounded that 'as scholars in the field of performance studies, we are both uniquely qualified and ethically obliged to explore specific sites of violence as well as larger questions about how violence is specifically performed'.[33] It focused on developing a spatial taxonomy of temporary inhabitation practices through a scenographic lens, and set two key goals: (1) to unpack the fragile transition refugees experience in their journey from home-loss to home-making; and (2) to examine scenographic capacities to be utilised as a tool for activism and advocacy. While motivated by the ongoing waves of forced displacement around the world at the time (Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Myanmar, Gaza), the experiences of refugees from SFR Yugoslavia were framed as a concrete case study. Reasons for this were dual: (1) the temporal distance from the events in the 1990s allowed a necessary reflective space to ethically engage with experiences of trauma, loss, and spatial negotiations — experiences that remain central to all humanitarian emergencies; and (2) since all participants in this panel had personal ties to the conflicts in the region, it was possible to achieve an embodied engagement with the material and to establish a simultaneously critical and empathetic lens.

Inspired by the medical connotation of the term 'triage', the panel hints at the urgent prioritisation of care. 'Spatial Triage' represents an analogy to describe the improvised and precarious spatial conditions that emerge in the immediate aftermath of home-loss. Prior to the event, a 'Call for Participation' was sent to the registered participants [Fig. 01], asking them to write about the first interior they inhabited after leaving their home. Fifteen letters were received in a dedicated digital submission box that did not require any personal details. This allowed the participants to remain anonymous, which prompted more detailed insights into spatial practices [Fig. 02]. The letters were examined from spatial, cultural, performative, and psychological perspectives. The result of this panel was a classification of information into four distinct categories: 'shared domestic interiors', 'residual domesticities', 'civic

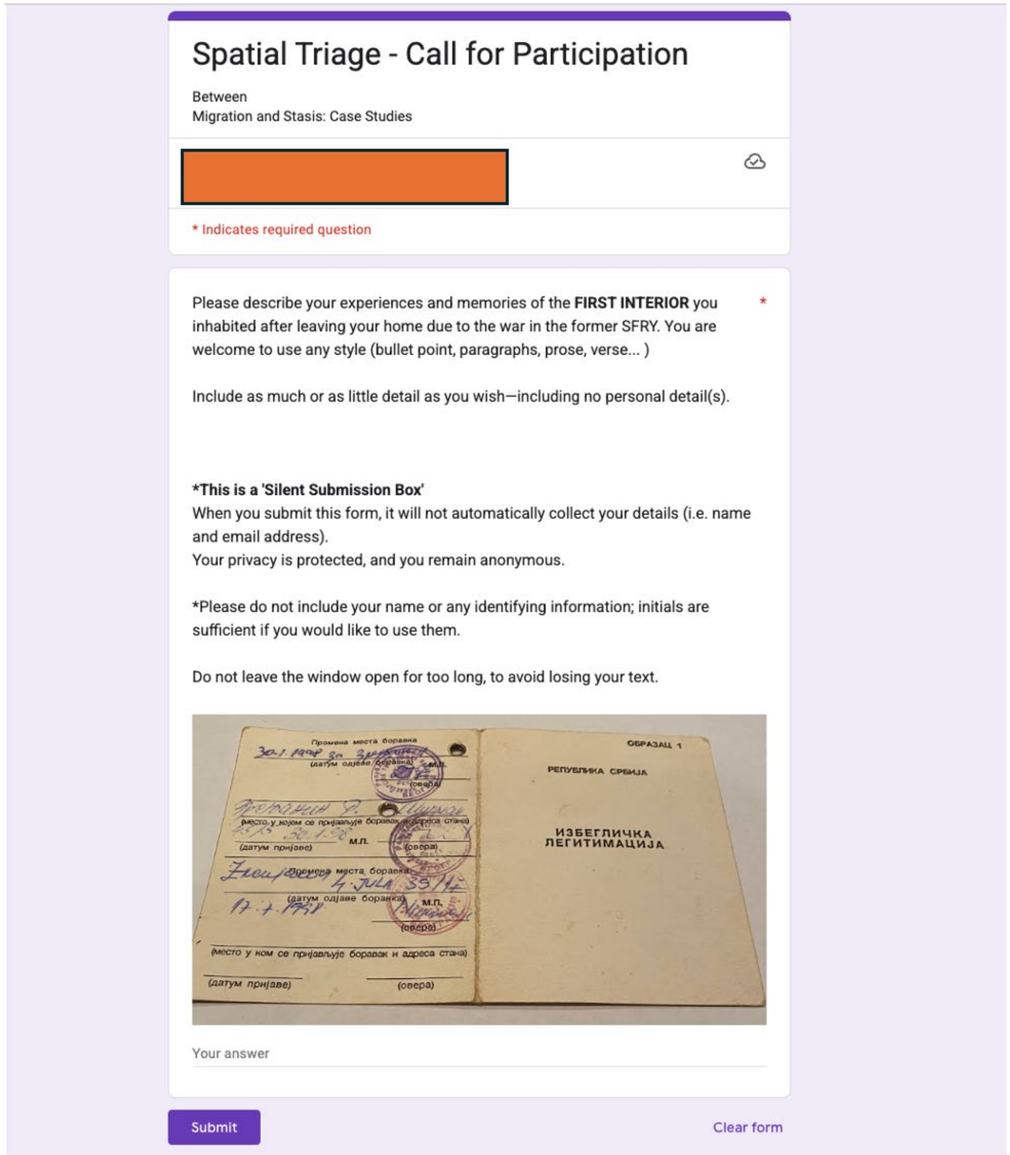


Figure 01.
'Call for Participation' ('Spatial Triage') includes the author's authentic image of Republic of Serbia Refugee Card. Photograph: Nevena Mrdjenovic, 2021.

conversions', and 'institutional thresholds.'[34]

Uniting all descriptions was an acute inscription of traumatic experiences and memories of psychologically charged spatial practices. This unique mode of inhabitation requires a spatial framework attuned to analysis beyond material forms and physical spatial conditions. It requires a discipline capable of profoundly unpacking complex spatial conditions, which involve embodiment, human presence, transformation, temporality, narrativity, performativity, relationality, atmosphere, and sensory engagement. The scenographic form of spatial inquiry embodies all required parameters and is concerned with how environments are composed, as well as how they are physically and psychologically experienced. This offers a vital methodological lens through which to investigate how displaced individuals navigate, adapt, and inhabit temporary interiors. As a practice rooted in narrativity and performativity, it also allows for a reading of the unplanned interiors that goes beyond

'Me, my sister and our cousin stayed with my mother's cousin, her husband and 11-year old son in Novi Beograd, Blok 61. We shared **a studio apartment (garsonjera)** dining room/living room in one, tiny kitchen, enclosed balcony turned into a small bedroom for her son. They adapted the space, turned the balcony into kid's bedroom. Other than this and the bathroom, the rest was **one open space. Three of us slept on a pull-out couch** and a mattress **on the floor** in the main room. During the day, **bedding was folded** and stacked in the corner. Every surface had **a dual purpose** coffee table for meals, later used as a desk for the boy. **Mornings were crowded**, everyone trying to get ready using one bathroom. The kitchen could only fit one person at a time; we took turns. **It was a good time to be alone**. I didn't mind cooking (although I wasn't very good). We had **no privacy**: conversations, emotions, arguments, phone calls – all shared. **Nights were the hardest**, too quiet to ignore the **closeness, too many bodies** in one space, too many memories of home. Breakfast, lunch, dinner - all organised between us, passing stuff to each other, reorganising the space. For three months. We had nowhere to put our clothes, we kept them in the bags, under the dining table. I remember **sitting on a windowsill**, pulling the curtain over me **to be alone, to think or to cry**.'

'my mother collected left-over male **clothes** to **create curtains, partitions, dividers.** She spent hours making them. The patterns on the clothing were familiar.'

'where we stayed was not a house, **just some walls to live behind.**
No electricity and running water, no furniture, barely anything.
But there was a white curtain!'

'In Belgrade for **two weeks with my son**
We stayed with my husband's relatives, I didn't know them.
They gave us **the kitchen**.
Other people were already here. I was a lawyer in Sarajevo, good career and spacious three bedroom apartment.
We **slept on a mattress, on the floor**. In kitchen.

I used **one chair as a wardrobe**. I made coffee for all in the morning. Silently. It gave me a purpose. I avoided leaving the kitchen. They were lovely people, but I was embarrassed. I cleaned the kitchen tops many times a day.

I rarely slept, I would sit at a table at night and wait for sunrise.'

'I didn't give up **rituals**, even **here**. Every morning, I would **turn the chair** to the sun, **pretend** life is **normal,** for 20 minutes. Quietly, imagine this will be over soon, I will go home. It has been 30 years, **I never went home**.'

'I **was 8** when we came to Karaburma. There was **three women and five children** in a small space. We had **one living room, combined kitchen and dining area, bathroom, and a small balcony**. My mum did not even know the woman this apartment belonged to. She was a cousin of one of the women staying with us, she was in Germany at the time. The space **felt like a box**. Us kids spent most time outside. In the **morning** we **would fold everything and push against the walls**. In the **evening**, we would **pull** everything out. My job was **to sweep the floor before bed.** I hated it. We **hung clothes across the ceiling,** to dry when it rained. I was embarrassed, but pretended it was funny. This was useful when we needed privacy. **To hide**. What I **remember the most is waiting**: to use the bathroom, to eat, to sleep. Grown ups were always tense. We lived like this for five months.'

Figure 02.
Excerpts from the letters collected through the 'Spatial Triage'. Photograph: Nevena Mrdjenovic, 2021.

temporary functional shelters, unpacking them as dynamic stages of improvisation, negotiation, and physical and psychological resilience. The interiors described and analysed across the four categories are presented as scenographic sites where survival is performed and witnessed.

‘shared domestic interiors’

‘Shared domestic interiors’ referred to relatives’ apartments and private homes, and, in these letters, participants largely focused on spatial improvisation within family networks — marked by overcrowding, emotional intensity, and negotiation, and informal (often chaotic) support systems. The scenographic framework of ‘Spatial Triage’ defined ‘shared domestic interiors’ as spaces where theatricality was recognised in heightened proximity, emotional intensity, and improvised choreographies.[35] These sites were charged with stages of overlapping routines, with implicit and explicit negotiation of spatial boundaries. These negotiations often occurred silently through gestures and repetition of domestic actions. Described interiors were inhabited in deeply relational manners, and the ordinary ‘overcrowding’ was reconfigured under extraordinary pressures.

One of the letters in this cluster documents three young women, all in their early twenties, arriving from their village in Croatia (1991) to stay with their relatives in Belgrade. A husband, wife, and their eleven-year-old son lived in an adapted studio apartment in a socialist block in New Belgrade. The apartment consisted of a combined living and dining area, small kitchen, bathroom, and what originally was a fully recessed balcony — now a miniature converted bedroom. Five adults and one child shared this space for three months. Another striking one was written by a young man who was eight years old when he arrived in Belgrade as a refugee from a small town in Croatia. His letter describes experiences of sharing a studio apartment on the outskirts of Belgrade with seven other people. Three mothers and five children negotiated life in a single living room, combined kitchen and dining area, bathroom, and a small balcony for five months. The third letter presents an experience of a middle-aged lawyer from Sarajevo, who arrived in Belgrade with her twelve-year-old son, and spent two weeks with her husband’s distant relatives. The elderly couple lived in a two-bedroom apartment in central Belgrade and had already taken in three other cousins from war-torn regions. The mother and son found themselves expelled from reality within days, replacing their spacious three-bedroom, light-filled apartment with a narrow kitchen in which they lived for two weeks.

Scenographically speaking, all letters document the framing of spaces as a continuously fluid condition: furniture doubles in function, thresholds between sleeping and social zones are dissolved, and everyday objects (folding beds, dining tables, window sills, curtains) take on heightened material and psychological significance. Focalisation, a scenographic strategy that utilises spatial, visual and sensory means to direct *what, how, and from whose perspective* an environment or a performance is experienced, emerged as highly significant here. It occurred through seemingly irrelevant daily rituals: the table set up, the rearrangement of bodies for sleep, the moment someone closed a door or moved a curtain to create a sense of privacy. These were the instances in which the performative nature of survival unfolded in the most intimate and seemingly prosaic gestures. TVs and radios were common points of focus, particularly early in the morning and late afternoon, when everyone waited for news from home. Ensuring everyone had a clear vantage point to the TV was an implicit rule at these times.

Inhabitation implied a negotiation in space, ruled by proximity, time, and scarcity. Relationality here had a dual meaning — human interactions and spatial layout: some stood while others sat, someone’s sleep was repeatedly interrupted, and they took turns in preparing meals. Whoever was close to the radio controlled whether it played music or news. In scenographic terms, these

interiors were actively *performed* and *transformed* multiple times a day, and they were also *witnessed*. Performance occurred through the acts of waiting (to change, to use the bathroom, to eat), folding (beds/tables/chairs), washing and rearranging, and withdrawing (sitting on a windowsill, behind a curtain). They naturally produced atmospheres of vulnerability and care — through acts of physical improvisation and psychological resilience. Atmospheres are accumulated through scent, noise, rhythm, and gestures. Materiality was also equally significant, with everyday objects (such as curtains, chairs, sofas, and dining tables) acquiring heightened meanings and significance. In this context, they did not simply serve their prime function, but also became tools to improvise and separate, to achieve privacy and preserve dignity among the chaos. In these spaces, privacy was a negotiated act and was often linked closely to spectatorship. With the limited space, everyone was both a performer and a spectator. The letters document that people quickly accepted their new roles and individual cues — children learnt to turn their gaze when situations got tense, pushing themselves into deep play to avoid the reality of scary news or witnessing adults in distressed emotional states. Women, on the other hand, engaged in domestic activities, almost as a form of meditation and a means of separation from reality.

'residual domesticities'

'Residual domesticities' referred to interiors never intended for permanent inhabitation — incompletely built summer homes and fragmented architectural remains: basements and storage rooms within residential buildings.[36] These spaces highlight temporary adaptive reuse of damaged, incomplete, or abandoned domestic sites. Letters received reveal that experiences in such interiors were marked by fragility, a sense of exposure, fear, and feelings of unease driven by traces of prior fragmented inhabitation. These interiors are a stark opposite to the idea of home; they are stripped of comfort, coherence, or clear markers of domestic functions. However, they each had a pronounced atmosphere, memory, and negotiation of inhabitation under duress. Materiality was consistent across the letters, and many mentioned unpainted or semi-exposed brick walls, minimal furniture that was damaged or with traces of long neglect, dim lighting — often just a single lightbulb in each room, key infrastructure such as heating, electricity, or plumbing that was barely functioning or simply absent.

One of the letters in this cluster describes a family of six, parents with four teenagers, escaping the coastal Croatian town of Zadar, and arriving at an unfinished holiday house near Novi Sad (Serbia) where they lived for three months. The house they lived in had no electricity nor running water. Similarly, another letter documents the experience of a mother and an eleven-year-old daughter who left their spacious second-floor apartment overlooking a local park in Croatian capital Zagreb at the peak of the conflicts in 1991. Their refuge was a damp storage room, located in the lower ground level of a residential building in Belgrade. The mother and daughter spent three weeks in this room, which was once occasionally occupied by a handyman for the building. The daughter, who wrote this letter, describes a barely hanging light bulb as the only source of light — and remembers how it cast long shadows over a pale green dining table and a set of three damaged chairs. The third letter in this group tells a story of a family of four who lived in a basement in a centrally located building in Belgrade for the first two months after they had left their home in a village in Bosnia.

'Residual domesticities' were primarily marked by the compression of function and emotion within interiors. Ordinary domestic activities, like cooking, sleeping, washing, had to be improvised and performed, adapted to the unfamiliar spatial taxonomies. In the basement and storage room, cooking was done on hot plates designed for simple meals only. In the holiday house with no electricity, people had to quickly adapt to burning fires to cook or make coffee or tea. In these spatial

experiences, fragmented spectatorship was one of the most powerful scenographic insights. Partial visibility exemplifies how spatial framing conditions the perceptual field: in a former storage room, nestling between the ground floor and basement, windows were low enough to reveal shoes and lower parts of human bodies, as well as occasional stray cats and dogs, and as such offered contact with the world, but also reinforced human isolation. Scenographically speaking, these windows also become an analogy for this mother and daughter's psychological and physical transition from a safe, upper-class socialist Yugoslav apartment filled with books and family memorabilia to a discarded, 'left-over' space in an unfamiliar city.

Atmospherically, these interiors are dense: concrete walls were often described as damp, the air was still and heavy, and fragmented past inhabitation was inscribed in the material and immaterial qualities of these interiors. Objects in spaces were scarce, but they held symbolic power. Letters document details of an unplugged fridge, faded dining table, a bed with a broken base, and a single white curtain [Fig. 02]. They become props used by displaced inhabitants to enact continuity, evoke familiar domestic gestures, and manage survival. A performative illustration of this is seen in the description of a mother in the holiday house, who continuously reorganised the scarce furniture in the space and placed the white curtain on a window above a dining table to create a familiar scene for family meals. Such acts define these interiors as improvised stages of physical and psychological resilience. Scenographically, these incomplete interiors are more than passive transient spaces and emerge as active spatial agents. They mediate relationality, shape how time and identity are perceived and performed, and reinforce roles within space. Finally, the narrative potential of these sites lies in the balance and tension between absence and presence. They reinforce the unique scenographic capacity to expose and understand the politics of temporary inhabitation — as an embodied and theatrical condition of living in interim.

'civic conversions'

'Civic conversions' referred to school and community halls converted into emergency shelters. Descriptions of such spaces primarily highlighted their temporariness, with formal layouts that commonly lacked order, privacy, and stability.[37] These interiors were originally designed for collective use, rather than domestic life. In the period of the early 1990s, they were recontextualised through acts of survival and spatial improvisation. Only a few letters documented these interiors, yet they all stressed the absence of partitions and thresholds between people. Zones of 'belonging' (to a family or an individual in space) were created through furniture arrangement — beds, chairs, small tables, and occasional storage cabinets. Without proper division between them, each zone was an open stage through which private life became unavoidably open for spectatorship. In contrast to the first two categories above, which were marked by spatial scarcity, these interiors were large, open, and echoing. The letters note that the scale of each space emphasised the human vulnerability in these settings. The overall spatial field was defined by the external walls of the actual hall and, with no proper divisions between people, they had to improvise using available props to create loose partitions out of large pieces of clothing or military blankets. One of these letters is written from the perspective of a boy who arrived at one of these camps with his mother and sister. He describes their experience over three months, and focuses on his mother, a woman in her early thirties who became a refugee and a single parent in a matter of days. He depicts his mother's creativity in collecting leftover large pieces of clothing donated by the locals, sewing them together by hand to create partitions for their 'zone'. The letter hints at the larger significance of this action, as the garments were predominantly male and featured familiar patterns. Details about his father are not revealed in the letter, but, scenographically, this action suggests that these gendered, fragmented garments could signify his

absence. Their seemingly practical use could further be interpreted as a re-inscription of the father figure into the space and the overall experience. Almost ritualistic stitching of male garments to create shelter within an open space could be seen as a re-establishment of the ideological role of men as protectors in war.

Another example of 'civic conversions' depicts an emergency shelter created in a school hall, in the town of Sid at the Serbian and Croatian border. Here, we gain insight from a ten-year-old girl who spent three days in this interior with her grandparents before moving to central Serbia. This interior was stripped of all comfort and became a space marked by proximity. Objects acquired new material meaning and scenographic significance: sleeping on improvised beds, her grandmother would set up her purse as a pillow for the two of them, and chairs doubled as dining tables. Moments and events in the space were organised around shared choreography: negotiating sleep times amid noise from the other areas; hiding behind scarves, blankets, and jackets to change; lining up for food, toilets, and showers. These interiors generate fragile notions of context, where people are both performers and spectators of one another's simultaneous vulnerability and resilience. Scenographically, these interiors were primarily shaped through focalisation: who can and cannot be seen, who is watching, and who manages to temporarily disappear within view.

'institutional thresholds'

'Institutional thresholds' here referred to worker's hotels and aged-care facilities, which were adapted in times of war.[38] These are semi-public facilities repurposed for refuges, in which the boundaries between care, control, and provisional shelters were often blurred. These interiors were initially designed for transitional habitation and regulated movement. Their layouts were repetitive and rigid: narrow corridors, uniform doors, thin mattresses, coarse blankets, dark wood furniture in each room, and low ceilings that further constricted the space. Described materiality reflected the original spatial function: scarce and straightforward, united through a series of dull brown tones. Mentions of the scent of musty and damp carpets in the hallways signal a persistent atmosphere of stasis in both locations.

One of the letters documents the experience of a young couple, in their late twenties at the time, as they escape a Croatian coastal town and arrive at a workers' hotel in central Serbia. In their experience, staging was largely fixed, but objects doubled in meaning — beds became tables during the day, chairs were used for sitting, creating spatial zones, and drying clothes. Focalisation was here recognised in small acts of domesticity — carefully placing a chair to catch the morning light or using a closet door as a partition to create privacy. These gestures became embodied acts of reclaiming agency through spatial actions. Another letter describes the experience of a family of four housed in an aged-care facility, in a single room, with a balcony overlooking a park and a private bathroom. Their daily life was choreographed around communal areas: children playing in the courtyard, parents engaging in fleeting encounters with other displaced families and remaining elderly residents. The use of space was negotiated between the old and new residents. Narrow hallways became sites of social gathering but also places where moments of isolation could occur. Similarly, doorways were thresholds of movement between spaces, but also of exposure. Often this revealed states of vulnerability or intimate moments of care. The spatial narrative was shaped by use, more than architectural intention. In both settings, embodiment was heavily restrained primarily through the compression of activities into confined zones.

act two: 'we (have) finally abandon(ed) our seat as spectators and are prepared to struggle with all our might to participate'[39]

The second part of the scenographic investigation, 'In the middle of NOWhere' (2023), extended the inquiry developed in 'Spatial Triage.' It took place as part of Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space (2023), and mobilised scenographic strategies

as instruments of intervention and care. The title hints at disorientation and rupture through violent displacement — an abrupt removal from roots and familiar contexts, and a shift into an existential limbo. The wordplay ‘nowhere’ and ‘now-here’ embodied the complexity of losing a home and being urgently forced into present-tense survival when decisions are to be made quickly, often with limited options and resources. This emphasis on urgency mirrors the acceleration of reality when violence was enacted upon homes.

The workshop invited spatial designers and performance makers to explore how scenography can respond to the realities of forced displacement. The exploration was grounded in questions of survival, resilience, and dignity — moving from reflective to speculative practices. The participants worked in two stages for over six hours. In the first part, they worked collectively to explore the capacities of common scenographic strategies of composition (staging, spatial sequencing, and material composition) and relational presence (relationality, atmosphere, focalisation, rhythm, and embodied performativity) to be translated into real-world applications [Fig. 03]. This was a generative phase that centred primarily on large-format collaborative maps [Fig. 04]. Participants employed design thinking approaches and reframed scenographic tools as spatial tactics for ethically engaged presence, care, and adaptation in times of crisis.

They interrogated how scenography can operate in sites like shared shelters, transitional rooms, and unfinished homes. The extended scenographic tools focused on non-visual perception (touch, scent, sound, spatial memory) and spatial improvisation that focuses on preserving dignity (creating environments that preserve agency, emotional safety, and cultural identity). A concept of ‘dignified improvisation’ emerged as one of the key methodological drivers. Through this, participants speculated on how limited or found materials can be used to construct interiors of care, ritual, and belonging without compromising refugees’ sense of self. They documented these explorations through a series of maps in which they explored the layers of connections between people, spaces, and landscapes. This framed scenography as an investigative tool capable of unpacking layers of traumatic memory embedded in spatial experiences.



Figure 03.
‘In the middle of NOWhere’ — mapping stage, Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space, Prague, Czech Republic. Photograph: Nevena Mrdjenovic, 2023.

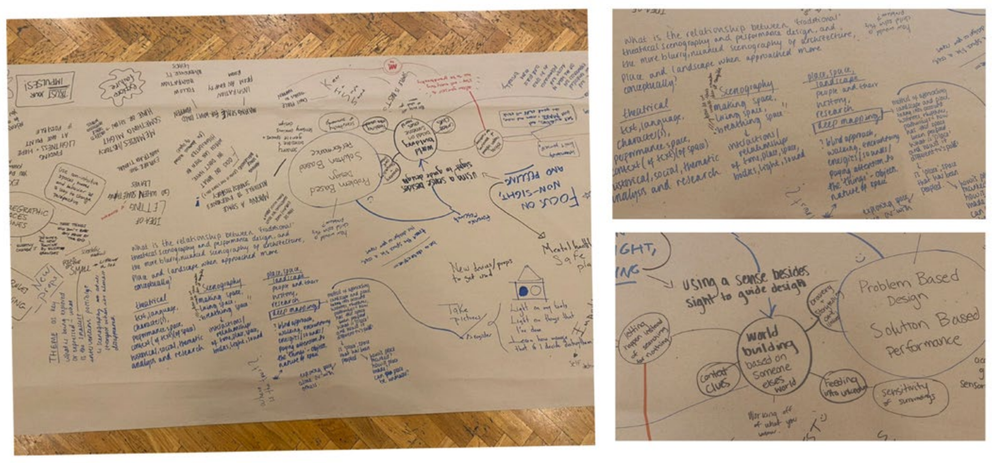


Figure 04.
Maps produced in the first part of the workshop. Photograph: Nevena Mrdjenovic, 2023.

In the second part of the workshop participants were given excerpts from the letters submitted in ‘Spatial Triage’ as scenographic prompts. They worked in haste, but with profound criticality. In small teams, participants applied newly expanded scenographic strategies and focused on producing speculative prototypes [Fig. 05]. These prototypes were aimed at fostering conversations for further action. They were prototypes of ‘dignified shelters’, but also of moments, events, and experiences that need to be taken into consideration during the design process. They built on strategies of staging, focalisation, relationality, embodiment, and materiality to propose spatial gestures that could be activated in real scenarios of displacement. Uniting all proposals was the sense of urgency and advocacy for humane and context-sensitive spatial

response to the ongoing global migration crisis. It asserted the capacity of scenographic discipline to make these crises visible, but also to intervene, reframe, and support.



Figure 05.
Speculative Prototypes focused not on final design solutions, but on unpacking key questions of experience of displacement. Photograph: Nevena Mrdjenovic, 2023.

conclusion

In the face of genocides and widespread ethnic and political violence, as well as unprecedented figures of forced uprooting, scenography's capacity to narrate, frame, and transform the unplanned infrastructure of refuge is critically urgent. Virilio's concept of 'dromology' teaches us that wars are events that operate through acceleration of reality, happening through destruction, displacement, and disorientation. When homes are under siege, they are erased in seconds, rupturing domestic life and casting people into a state of psychological and spatial suspense. This rupture makes a dramatic impact on the journey between home-loss and home-making. The in-between stage is a crucial point in personal and collective history, marking moments in which acts of survival occur, primarily through re-enacting spatial agency. Through its unique capacities, scenography allows spatial discourses to actively respond to and engage with issues of war, ethnic cleansing, humanitarian policy, and uneven geographies of care.

acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all the participants of 'Spatial Triage' and 'In the middle of NOWhere'. Their critical and creative insights, as well as their passion for performative and political capacities of spatial studies, have been instrumental in shaping the core ideas of this essay.

I dedicate this essay to all those currently living between 'home-loss' and 'home-making'.

All contributions to the 'Spatial Triage' project were collected anonymously.

author biography

Nevena Mrdjenovic (PhD) is a theorist and designer with expertise in interior architecture and scenography. Her research practice is concerned with the performative, cultural, and political capacities of space. Nevena is a lecturer in Interior Architecture, University of Technology, Sydney. She has previously worked across theatre, film, installation art, and pedagogy in Australia and Europe.

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in flux: unplanned spatial adaptations in syrian refugee camps

Rana Abudayyeh
University of Tennessee, Knoxville
0000-0003-4160-6802

abstract

The interiors of refugee camps are spaces of necessity, resilience, and constant negotiation. Far from static or predetermined, these environments evolve through the improvisational agency of displaced communities. This visual essay illustrates how Syrian refugees retrofit and reconfigure shelter units to recreate spatial conditions that mirror deep-rooted cultural practices. Within the constraints of standardised humanitarian planning, refugees enact makeshift adjustments that transform rigid layouts into dynamic and culturally resonant interiors. Through these adaptive practices, ranging from self-built partitions and communal extensions to informal marketplaces, camps become sites of unplanned interiority, where social bonds and spatial memories materialise despite displacement.

This research draws from extensive fieldwork in Al Zaatari Refugee Camp, incorporating photography, video documentation, and diagrammatic analysis to capture the evolving spatial negotiations within the camp. By foregrounding the lived experiences of refugees in Al Zaatari Camp, the study challenges conventional notions of planning and design as top-down processes. Instead, it highlights the agency embedded in informal and emergent spatial interventions that contest the anonymity of the humanitarian shelter. Through critical engagement with concepts of temporality, maintenance, and shared authorship, this study situates refugee camps as evolving, co-produced interiors that extend beyond mere crisis planning and accommodation. Ultimately, it argues for an expanded understanding of interiority — one that recognises unplanned spatial practices as central to sustaining community, identity, and belonging in the face of ongoing uncertainty.

keywords

unplanned interiors; refugee camps; spatial adaptation; displacement; interiority

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unplanned interiors and the architecture of displacement

Refugee camps are spaces in flux, caught between the rigidity of humanitarian planning and the fluidity of lived experience. The humanitarian refugee camp is often treated first as a logistical challenge rather than acknowledged as a spatial reality. Standardised and rationalised, its design is driven by urgency and constraint, translated into modular shelter units, gridded infrastructure, and predetermined plans.[1] Yet life within the camp rarely conforms to this order. Across displacement settings globally, and in the Al Zaatari Refugee Camp in Jordan in particular, spatial practices exceed what is planned.[2] What begins as enclosure becomes inhabited through improvisation.[3] What is delivered as temporary accommodation evolves into complex interior geographies shaped by cultural continuity, material necessity, and social memory.[4] To frame this contrast, it is important to recall that Al Zaatari (like many other camps) was initially organised through a formal master plan. Modular shelters were allocated to individual plots, laid out in a rigid grid, with designated service corridors and shared sanitation blocks. This imposed order provides the critical backdrop against which unplanned spatial adaptations take form. This essay argues that these acts of spatial transformation are not incidental or secondary to the camp's purpose. Rather, they are central to how displaced communities reclaim space as a site of belonging and agency. Drawing from fieldwork conducted in Al Zaatari Refugee Camp, this study traces how Syrian refugees continually retrofit and rework the humanitarian template. Their adaptations range from modest interventions, such as hanging curtains for privacy and laying rugs to define gathering zones, to extensive transformations such as clustering shelter units and repurposing their components to construct new spaces including communal kitchens, market stalls, shaded courtyards, and informal gardens. These alterations are not merely practical; they are culturally and politically significant. They challenge the assumptions embedded in humanitarian planning and foreground alternative forms of spatial authorship.

Architectural historian Robin Evans has argued that architectural plans are not neutral instructions for construction, but ideological instruments designed to prescribe and contain behaviour.[5] In humanitarian aid contexts, this logic of 'planned' containment and its prescribed behaviours intensifies, often erasing cultural spatial differences in the name of efficiency and compliance. While Evans positions planned spaces as catalysts of behaviour, philosopher Henri Lefebvre reminds us that space is not passively received but actively produced through appropriation, use, and the lived practices of everyday life.[6] His theory of spatial production insists that space is never fixed but always relational and socially constructed.[7] Anthropologist Setha Low further elaborates this position, emphasising that space is constituted not only through physical form but also through embodied experiences, emotional attachments, and cultural practices. Her ethnography of space foregrounds how marginalised groups assert identity and claim presence through everyday spatial practices.[8] Building on these theoretical positions, the following pages, through diagrams, photographs, video clips, and field notes, examine how temporality, maintenance, and shared authorship emerge as critical dimensions of unplanned interiority in refugee camps. By attending to the ways spaces are negotiated, adapted, and cared for over time, this essay reframes the refugee camp not as a static or failed form but as a dynamic interior terrain. This is not to romanticise displacement, but to recognise that even under conditions of forced mobility, interior space sustains personhood, memory, and social relations.

cartographies of exile and the making of unplanned interiors

Displacement unfolds in many trajectories at once, across borders, through buildings, and into the intimate spaces of everyday life. Tracing the geography of Syrian refugees as they move from familiar terrain into the fragmented landscapes of Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and beyond reveals the nonlinear paths of forced migration. These paths twist, pause, and disappear altogether, shaped as much by shifting policies and checkpoints as by personal needs. Movement, in this context, is not only about distance; it is negotiated through layers of surveillance, temporary protection, and the invisible scaffolding of humanitarian control.[9] In that sense, displacement is never simply about being moved. It is about living within systems that regulate how, when, and where movement is allowed.[10] Still, even within these precarious conditions, life does not stop. In fact, it insists.

The images in this section trace the movement of refugees and the changing forms of emergency shelters: first tents, then the harder edges of prefabricated units.[11] These structures are designed for delivery, efficiency, and containment. But people remake them. Tarps stretch out to cover entryways as extension cords knit one unit to another. Cooking (among other interior acts) moves outside, into the open air, while a few concrete blocks and wooden boards become a bench for neighbours to gather. These are unplanned acts in the architectural sense, quiet, perhaps, but resolute. They are gestures of belonging, of holding on to rituals, of making room for the relations between and the practices of people.[12] In these improvised extensions, at thresholds, in corners, under shade, one finds the emergence of interiorities not drawn by architects or planned by agencies but made in the in-between: fragile and deeply human.

Figures 01 to 04: Cartographies of Exile
The following figures present a visual archive of displacement. Diagrams by Rana Abudayyeh, Sarah Dunn, and Kathryn Webb, 2023.

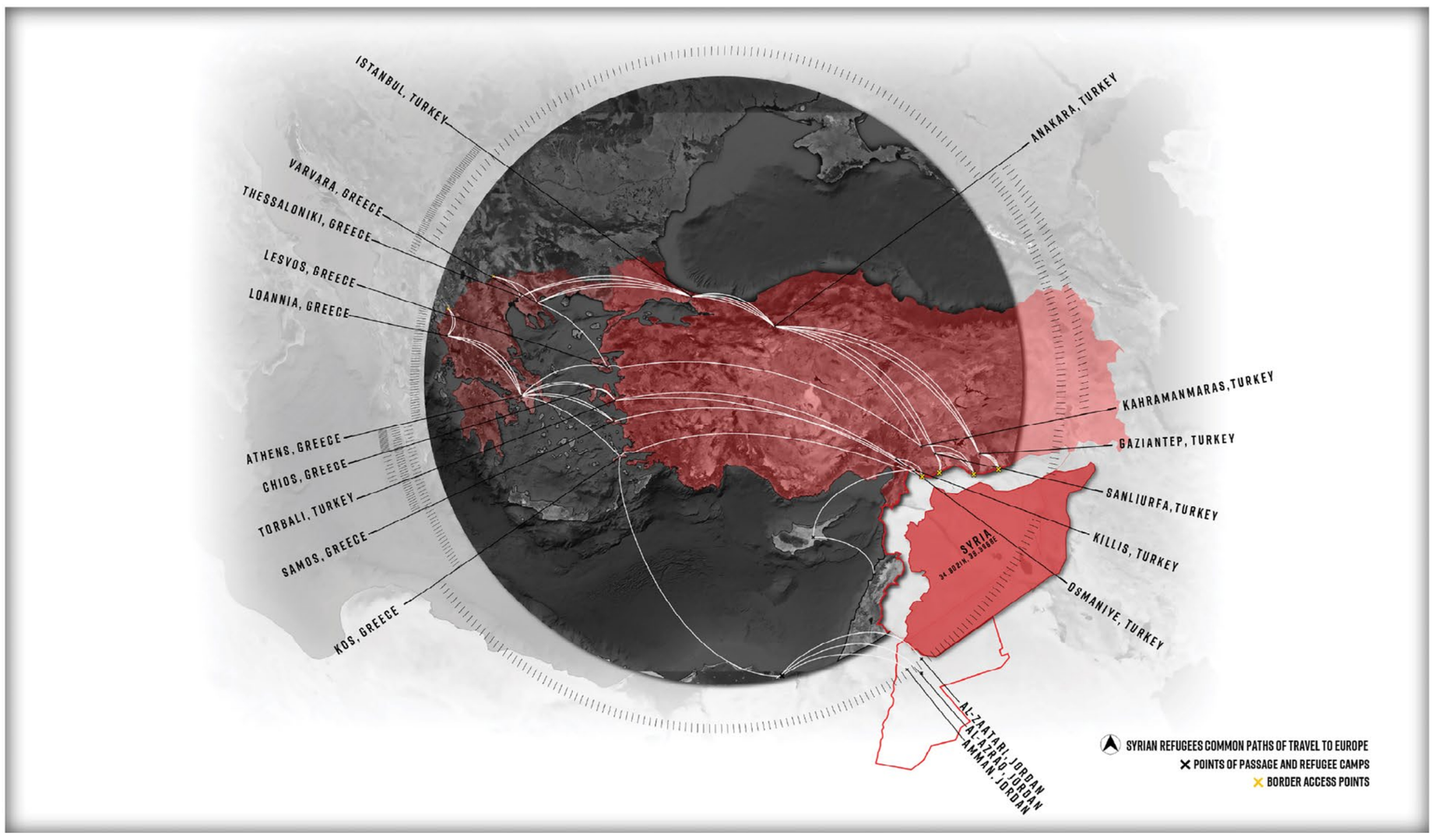
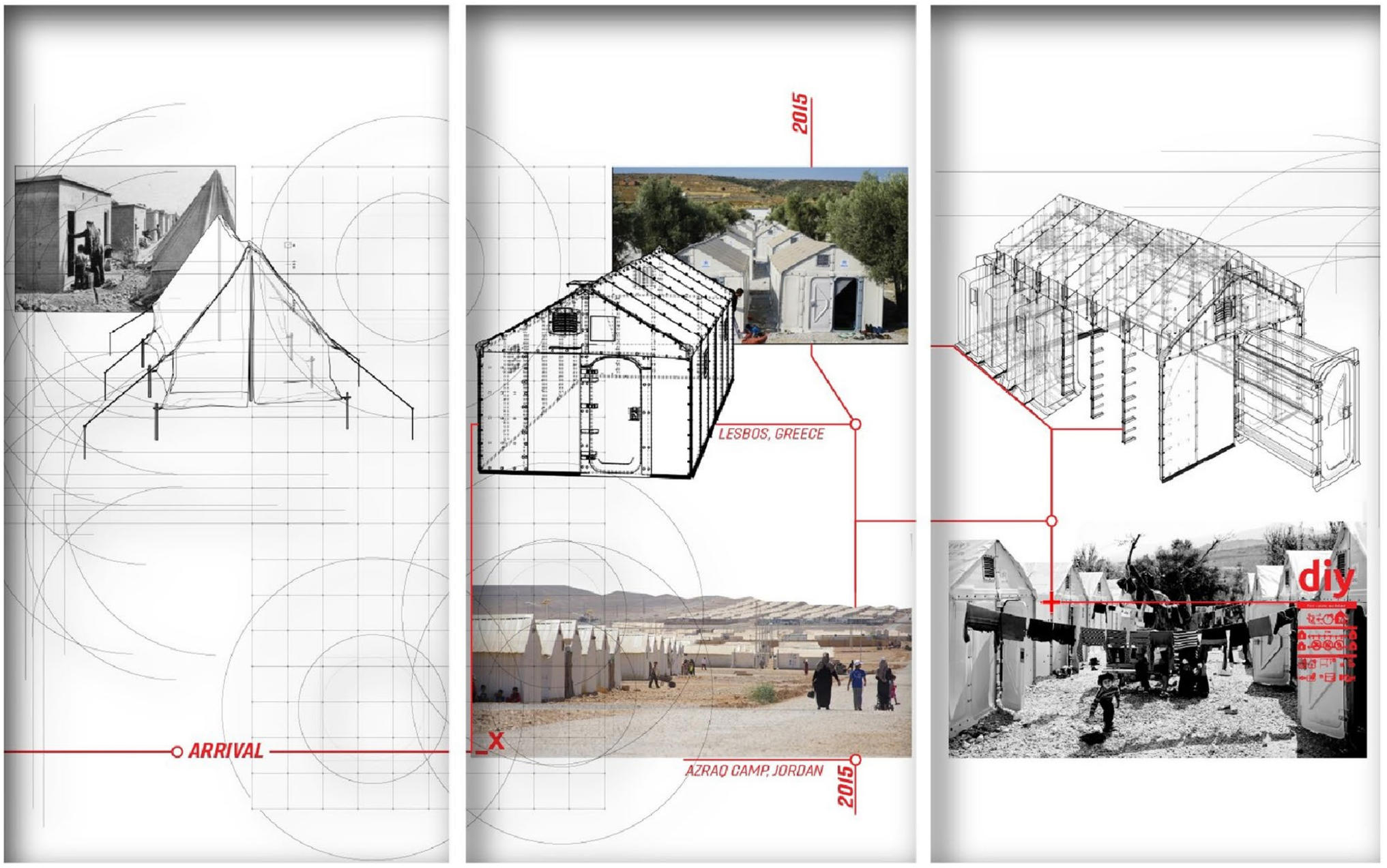


Figure 01.
A geopolitical diagram maps the movement of Syrian refugees across national borders, from camps to cities and, in many cases, into further uncertainty.

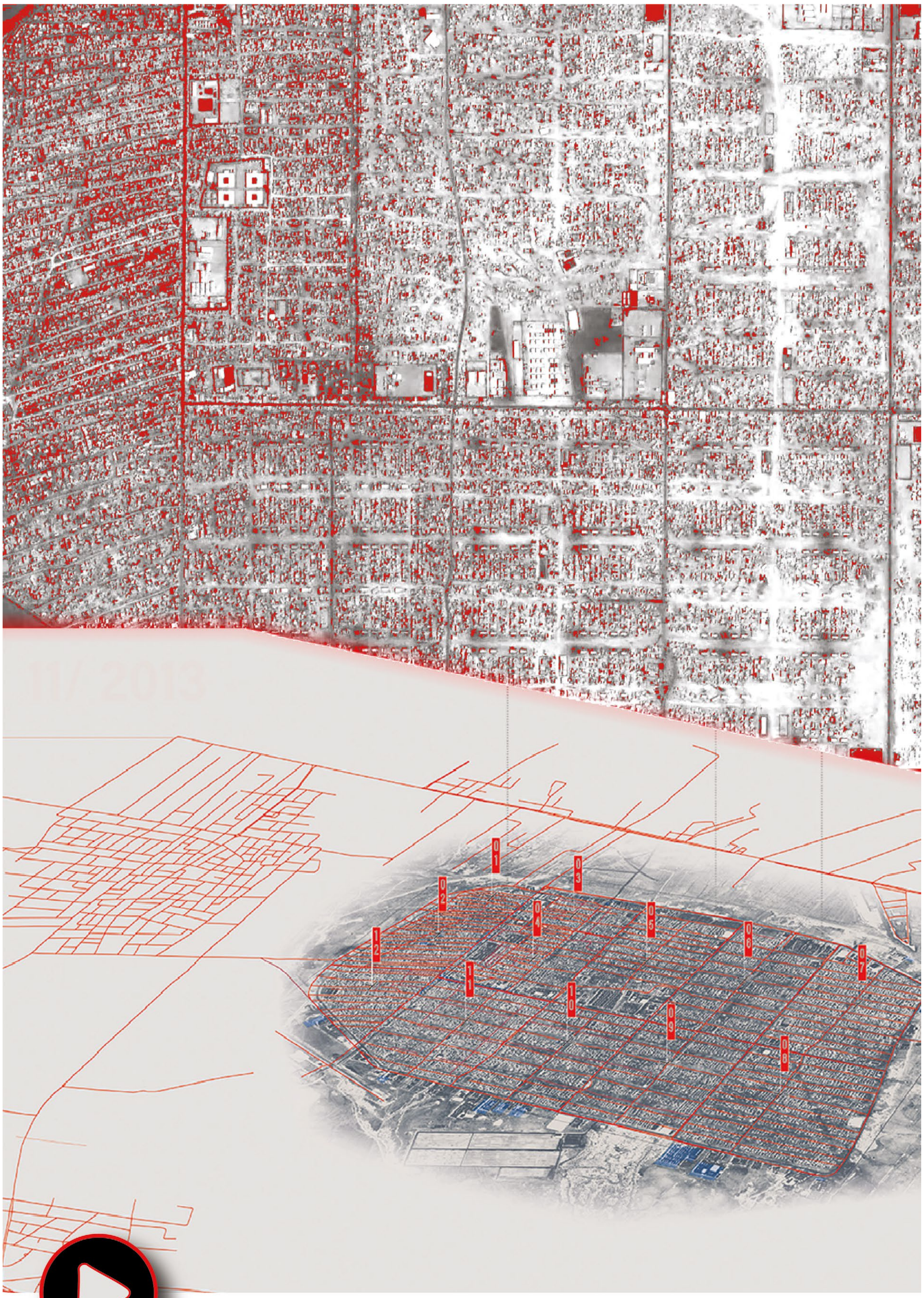


Figures 02, 03, and 04.
A triptych of photographic and typological studies traces the evolution of shelter forms, from emergency tents to prefabricated units.

al zaatari: encampment becoming city

Al Zaatari Refugee Camp was not built xto last. It followed the logic of crisis management where uniform shelter units were arranged for control, speed, and containment. But people arrived with rhythms and memories that could not be boxed in. Families began to reshape their surroundings. They turned shelters of extended families to face one another, creating familial clusters. Gaps became courtyards and extensions were added to create kitchens, shaded porches, and places to rest, engage, and share.[13] These acts were not random; they followed an interior kind of thinking where refugees built from the inside out, shaping space to support what they needed most. The desire to be together, to hear a neighbour's voice, to create a space that felt familiar: these were the needs guiding how the camp took and retook form. The unplanned private and public interiors of Al Zaatari did not emerge from formal design; they evolved from deliberate cultural reclamation.[14] They came from a resolute spatial agency, from the small decision to shift a shelter slightly, opening space for a shared space, from spreading a tarp that became a shaded gathering place. Such rearrangements were never just about comfort; they were about restoring the conditions for daily life to take hold, and about preserving a sense of home, even amid uncertainty.[15]

Animation 01: Encampment Becoming City
(click on play icon to access).
Satellite imagery reveals more than a camp. It reveals a city in the process of becoming. The animation captures Al Zaatari Camp's transformation over time. What began as a strict modular grid gradually loosened. Red overlays trace informal expansions that disrupted the original order. Shelters were shifted, rotated, and clustered. A market spine emerged through the centre. Neighbourhoods formed. The grid bent to accommodate life. Images by Rana Abudayyeh using Google Earth aerial views.[16]



Animation 01: Encampment Becoming City
(click on play icon to access).

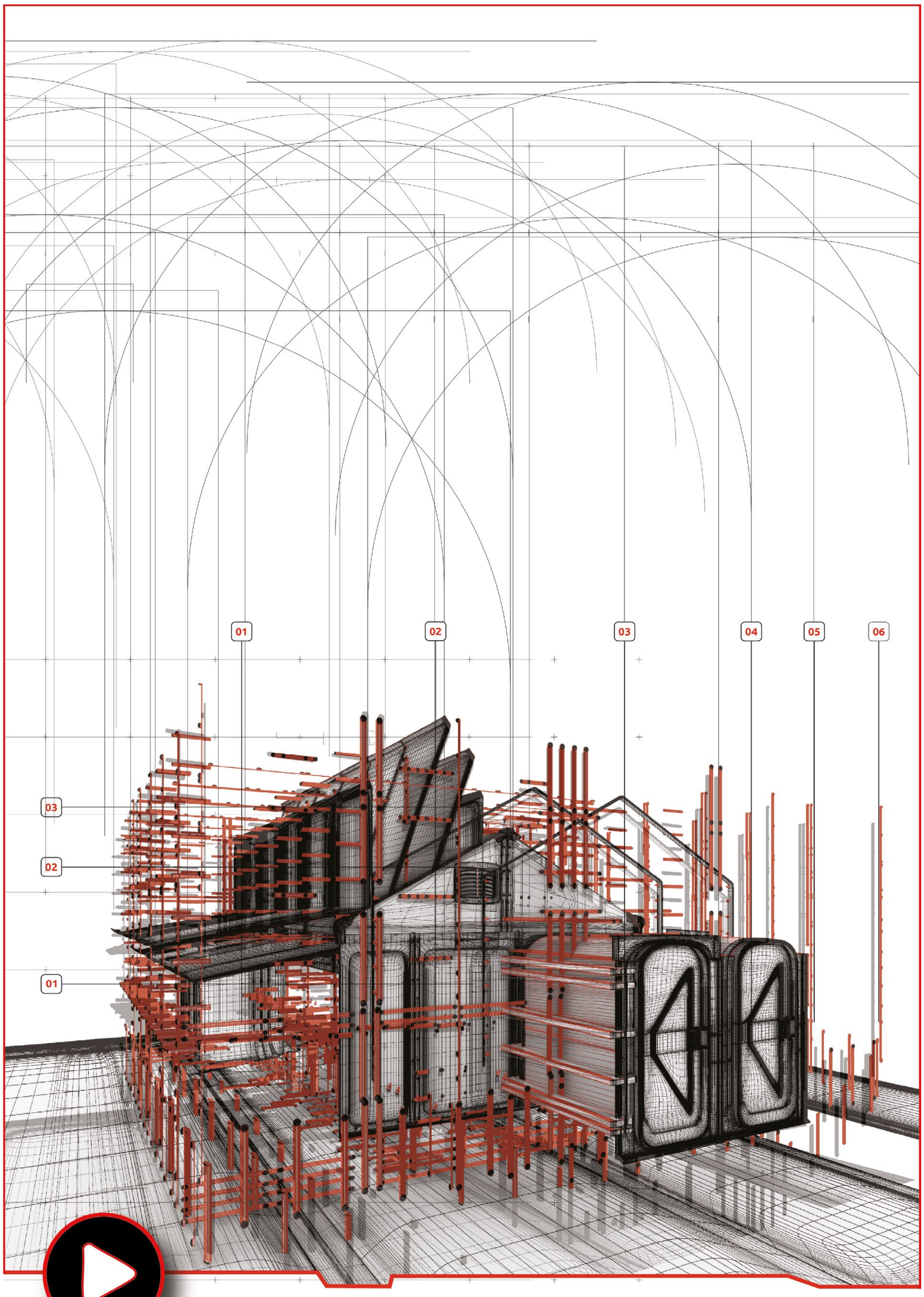
architecture under revision

The refugee shelter does not remain as it was given, and it does not stay obedient to the plan. From the beginning, residents altered it, extended its roofs, and moved its entry points. Walls go up, storage is added, and boundaries shift. These are not minor adjustments; they are deliberate acts of transformation to make the space usable, protective, and responsive to daily life in the camp. In doing so, residents transform the camp into a reinterpreted living space that can be described and understood as *domestic refugee architecture*.[17] The emergence of this *domestic refugee architecture* reflects Michel de Certeau's insight into the ingenious ways in which people make use of structures and spaces imposed upon them.[18] It stands as a critical counterpoint to the representations of space defined by humanitarian and government agencies, instead producing what Henri Lefebvre refers to as *spaces of representation*: lived, symbolic, and socially embedded environments that resist imposed spatial order through the agency of everyday life.[19]

The following animated drawing conceptually captures that transformation. Red lines reveal not theory but practice. They trace where an extension needed to go, where the light was blocked, where fabric became structure, and where two units fused together. Every line is a record of change, of refusal to live inside someone else's definition of shelter. These modifications are not optional; they are essential. They are how space becomes inhabitable. As such, the unplanned interior is not an accident. It is made through direct engagement with materials, weather, family dynamics, and cultural rhythms. It is rebuilt again and again, not because it fails, but because it is being lived in. What emerges here is not one solution. It is a layered architecture shaped by necessity and reshaped again the next day. In this architecture, the drawing does not represent a finished design. It shows what survival looks like when the interior is taken beyond what is planned.

Animation 02: Unbuilding the Shelter
(click on play icon to access).

A speculative wireframe animated drawing reconstructing the modular refugee shelter through layered intervention. Red lines trace alterations to structure, function, and spatial use. This is not a proposal, but a drawing of unplanned spatial insistence and lived adaptation. Image by Rana Abudayyeh, 2023.



Animation 02: Unbuilding the Shelter
(click on play icon to access).

field notes from the interior

The modifications on the exterior reflect interior everyday realities. Here, the unplanned interior shapes the exterior with immense care and calibration. Living spills outward into shaded, ornate porches and courtyards. Inside, a living room and a kitchen are situated in a repurposed shelter unit. It has been carefully modified: salvaged shelves support pots and utensils, plastic crates hold dry goods, and the surfaces are fitted with precision using playful fabrics. While unplanned, these interiors are crafted piece by piece to support daily life. A curtain shades the entry and separates spaces within the conjoined shelter units. Car batteries are hacked to provide auxiliary power sources, while original standardised components of the shelter, like door handles, are replaced with bespoke ones. Through these modifications the interior becomes rooted, inhabited, and specific; it is freed from the imposition of the plan. Elsewhere in the camp's main corridors, prefabricated shelter caravans have been reconfigured into commercial spaces. Materials (some found, others smuggled) form extensions, vitrines, signage, and shade structures. The result is a vibrant spine of economic and social life. In these photos and videos, you can trace where structure gives way to invention. A city grows not from plan but from presence. These unplanned spaces are not anomalies; they are part of the camp's spatial fabric. The unplanned interior emerges here through use and insistence. It lives in the details: the way a shelf is balanced on bricks; how two caravans are joined with tarpaulin and string; how a corner becomes a place to rest, to greet, to gather. To call these spaces unplanned is not to suggest disorder. It is to recognise a different form of authorship, one shaped by memory, scarcity, and the rhythms of daily life. They are the outcome of persistent spatial negotiations that fold care, utility, and cultural continuity into each gesture. They are not supplementary. They are central to how life continues in displacement.

Figures 05–17; animations 03–04: Unplanned Interiors: Field Documentation
Photographs and video clips from fieldwork in Al Zaatari were taken by the author during the summer of 2023. What they show is not the architecture of emergency, but rather of emergence.



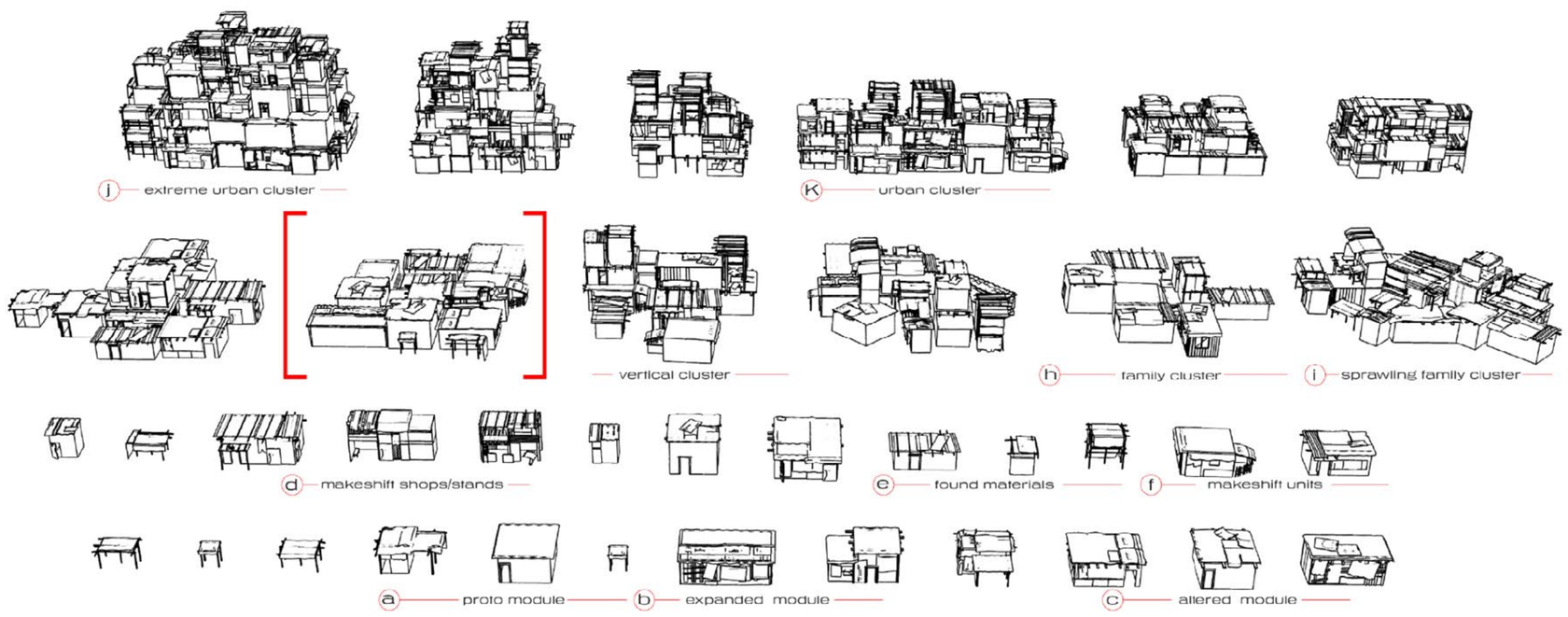


Figure 05.
At the top: A residential cluster in Al Zaatari Camp, Jordan.

Figure 06.
At the bottom: Analytical diagrams tracing the camp's transformation from a prototype shelter unit into a residential cluster, highlighting a key stage in its spatial evolution.



Animation 03.
A drive through of residential districts 01 and 02 in Al Zaatari Camp, showing the diverse materialities and spatial formations devised by refugees.

(click on play icon to access).

Figure 07.
A diagram documenting path of a drive through in Al Zaatari as shown in Animation 03.



Figure 08.
Exterior of a residential cluster formed by combining multiple shelter units and modifying them to meet residents' needs.



Figure 09.
Exterior of a home created by joining several shelter units and adding a porch.



Figure 10.
Exterior of a modified shelter cluster organised around a shared courtyard that functions as both a social space and a climatic buffer.



Figure 11.
Interior view of a residential cluster showing a multiuse room that serves as both living and sleeping space.



Figure 12.
A kitchen in a shelter unit, fitted with custom cabinets and shelving.



Figures 13, 14, and 15.
Interior views of the same home, showing varied cladding materials and makeshift details that contribute to a sense of homeliness.



Figure 16.
A view of the commercial district in Al Zaatari Camp, Jordan.



Animation 04.
Drive through the commercial spine of Al Zaatari Camp. The video clip illustrates how modular shelters have been repurposed and deployed to form shops.

(click on play icon to access).

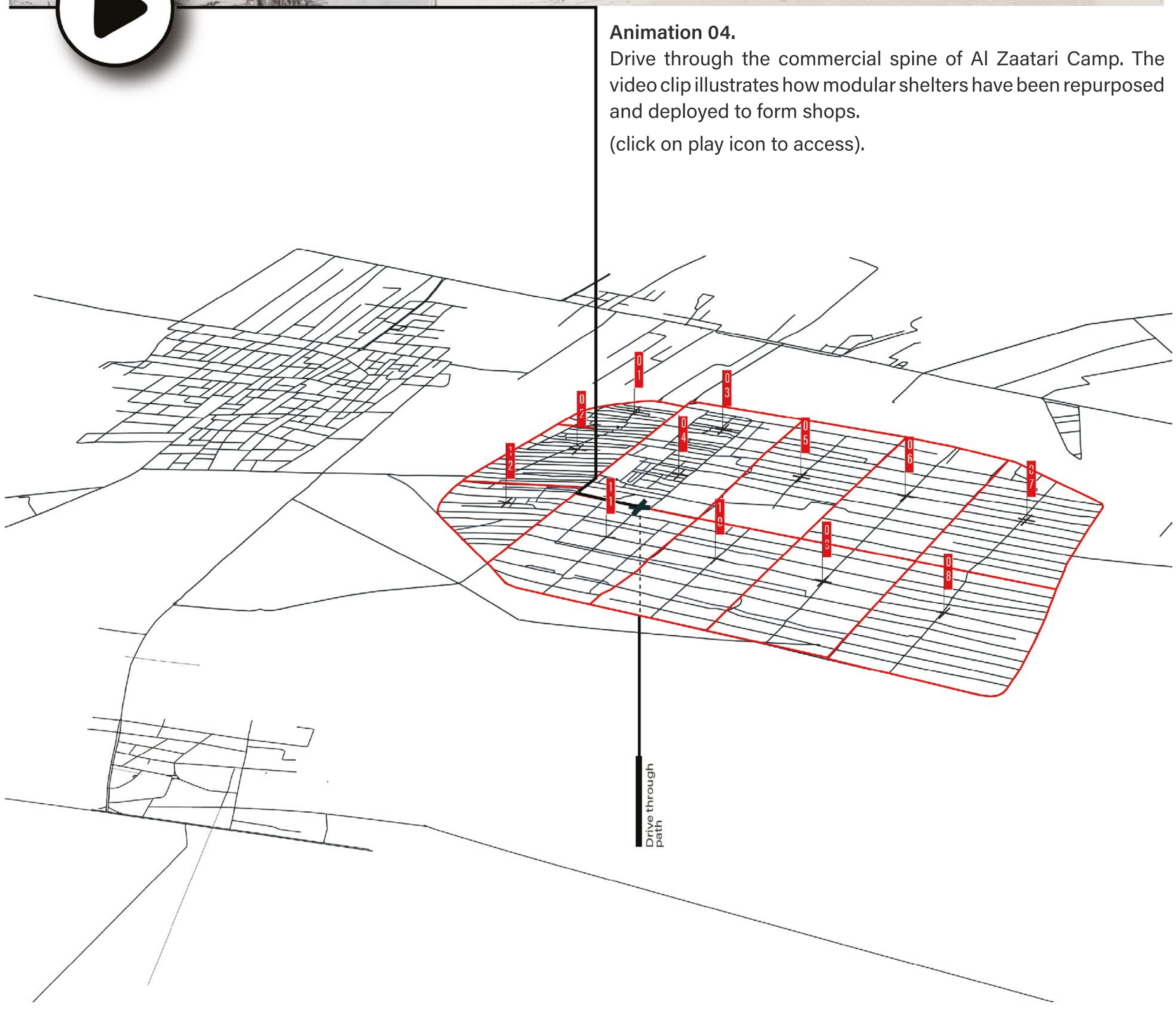


Figure 17
Diagram documenting the path of a drive through in Al Zaatari as shown in Animation 04.

conclusion

Displacement reshapes more than geography; it remakes the very structure of life. Within the constraints of the camp, refugees transform space not only to survive but also to remember, to gather, and to assert presence. Here, what begins as emergency relief becomes lived territory, shaped by acts of resilience and resistance. The unplanned interior is not incidental; it is a space of quiet authorship, drafted without permission yet full of intent. These spaces emerge where the blueprint stops. They are formed through rituals that resist erasure: planting, cooking, sitting, hosting, repairing. Each act may appear ordinary, yet together they accumulate into a language of persistence. Such gestures of maintenance become declarations. In their repetition, they produce a form of care that unsettles the logic of displacement. This is not a story of formal invention; it is a story of tenacity told through patchwork roofs, shared porches, and adaptations that refuse containment. What unfolds in these interiors is more than modification; it is the forging of space that holds memory, meaning, and the stubborn refusal to be erased. Learning from the spaces of Al Zaatari, we see that architecture is not always what is designed but what is made — together, unplanned, in flux.

acknowledgements

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author biography

Rana Abudayyeh is an Associate Professor of Interior Architecture and the Robin Klehr Avia Professor at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Her work explores design as a framework for placemaking, belonging, and spatial justice. Abudayyeh is the recipient of the 2024 IIDA Educator Diversity Award for advancing equity in design education.

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war rooms: interiors under siege in beirut and baghdad

Endriana Audisho
University of Technology Sydney
0000-0002-5826-0687

abstract

Few forces disrupt the stability of architectural planning and the intended use of interior spaces more profoundly than conflict. In cities marked by war, interiors become sites of both resistance and adaptation, where the prescribed ideals of design are reshaped by the exigencies of survival, displacement, and the reorganisation of social and spatial orders. Historically, certain architectural typologies, particularly hotels, have had their interiors reconfigured in unplanned ways, repurposed for strategic, functional, and humanitarian roles that position them at the centre of conflict.

This essay examines the interiors of two such hotels — the Holiday Inn in Beirut and the Al-Rashid Hotel in Baghdad — to explore how their spaces were reconfigured during conflict in response to distinct geopolitical and military needs. During the Lebanese Civil War's 'Battle of the Hotels' (1975–1976), the Holiday Inn, situated along what was rapidly emerging as Beirut's Green Line, was transformed into a fortified military stronghold. Its upper floors and rooftop were converted into sniper positions, turning the interior into a key site of resistance. In contrast, during the Gulf War in 1991, the Al-Rashid Hotel became a media hub for international correspondents. Journalists from Cable News Network navigated its interior features, such as strip windows and expansive rooms, to provide 24-hour real-time coverage of the war.

The following analysis employs a methodology that draws on journalistic accounts from both case studies. These include textual, visual, and video media, which are synthesised to bring together heterogeneous sources and spatialise the transformations of space under siege. By examining these unplanned conditions, the essay argues that architecture responds to the shifting moral, social, and spatial contexts of conflict. Methods of composite analytic drawing are used to visualise how space is reconfigured under siege, and reframes hotel interiors as contingent infrastructures that unsettle assumptions about planning and design. These case studies highlight how architecture is reshaped in times of crisis, revealing its entanglement with the evolving realities of conflict.

keywords

urban warfare; geopolitics; media narratives; architecture; interiors

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introduction: interiors at war

Conflict challenges the very premise of architectural design, which assumes that space can be planned, contained, and stably occupied. In cities marked by war, interiors become highly adaptive, responding to conditions that exceed or contradict their original purpose. While architecture is often analysed through its formal or aesthetic qualities, less attention has been paid to the spatial politics of interiors under siege. In such contexts, interior space is neither neutral nor peripheral. It becomes central to the choreography of crisis, hosting military operations, enabling media performance, and reorganising itself in response to shifting political, technological, and logistical demands. In this sense, these are unplanned interiors: spaces whose intended functions collapse under the pressures of conflict and are reconfigured through contingent, improvised use.

Hotels are particularly susceptible to these transformations.[1] Their central locations, ambiguous public-private status, and ready-made infrastructure make them both strategically valuable and symbolically charged during wartime. This essay positions hotel interiors as critical yet underexamined sites within the urban theatre of conflict. Focusing on two case studies — the Holiday Inn in Beirut during the Battle of the Hotels (1975–1976) and the Al-Rashid Hotel in Baghdad during the Gulf War (1991) — the essay explores how hotel interiors were reconfigured in response to distinct military, geopolitical, and media imperatives. Although these events differ in their legal and political contexts, with the former a civil war fought by militias and the latter an international war between state actors, both hotels became central nodes in the spatial and symbolic infrastructure of their respective conflicts. One was militarised, the other mediatised; both were radically transformed from within.

The analysis draws on journalistic accounts as well as photographic and video media and contributes original composite analytic drawings to spatialise how each hotel's interiors were reconfigured under siege. The evidentiary terrain is uneven. The Holiday Inn is extensively documented through photographs, news footage, and retrospective accounts, whereas the Al-Rashid Hotel survives largely through the live audio of Cable News Network (CNN) broadcasts. This imbalance is not a limitation but a condition of analysis, foregrounding how conflict produces uneven forms of mediation and visibility, and necessitating methods that weigh partial, biased, and often speculative evidence against one another. Conceptually, the essay draws on spatial and media theory: Eyal Weizman's concept of the politics of verticality informs the reading of the Holiday Inn; Paul Virilio's writings on speed and vision frame the Al-Rashid; Jean Baudrillard's critique of hyperreality sharpens the analysis of how war was consumed as a spectacle; and Beatriz Colomina's work situates architecture within systems of publicity and media. Together, these lenses offer insight into how hotel interiors, materially and symbolically, become implicated in the shifting logics of urban warfare and its mediatised representation. In this way, the essay makes both methodological and conceptual contributions to the study of unplanned interiors.

case study one — the militarised interior: the holiday inn, beirut

the battle of the hotels: urban conflict on the green line

In April 1975, the first confrontations of what would become a fifteen-year civil war erupted on the streets of Beirut. The immediate trigger came on 13 April when Phalangist gunmen ambushed a bus carrying Palestinian passengers in Ain al-Rummaneh, killing twenty-seven. This was a retaliatory act following an earlier shooting outside a nearby church.[2] The roots of the conflict, however, were far more complex. Lebanon's fragile confessional political system, the regional fallout from the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, and tensions between Christian conservatives and Muslim progressives collided within Beirut's dense urban fabric. The influx of Palestinian refugees after 1967 altered the city's demographics, exacerbating political disputes over Lebanon's national identity and its relationship to Arab regional struggles.[3]

As sectarian divisions hardened, the city itself was physically and symbolically split. East Beirut became predominantly controlled by Christian factions, while western sectors fell under Muslim and leftist forces. The contested boundary that separated the two sides was a shifting and violently enforced frontier that became known as the 'Green Line'.[4] The brutality and spatial complexity of this urban war were most visible along the coastal hotel district of Minet el Hosn, an area that, until hostilities broke out, had embodied Beirut's image of luxury, commerce, and modernity. During the so-called 'Golden Age' of the 1950s and 1960s, Beirut had been dubbed the 'Paris of the Middle East' and 'Switzerland of the East', titles that highlighted its role as a financial and tourist hub. Nowhere was this identity more concentrated than in the hotel district, where developments signalled Lebanon's integration into global networks of capital, leisure, and diplomacy. But as political geographer Sara Fregonese notes, Beirut's hotel district was itself a 'very specific product of a precise geopolitical project'.[5] This carefully curated image was vulnerable to collapse.

That collapse began with the outbreak of the 'Battle of the Hotels', a protracted confrontation that transformed the district from a site of opulence into a battlefield.[6] What unfolded was not merely the repurposing of architecture for combat but the violent subversion of Beirut's urban identity, in which icons of modernity were co-opted as instruments of war. The fighting, which escalated intermittently between October 1975 and March 1976, marked the first major confrontation between the Christian Lebanese Front, a coalition of right-wing Christian nationalist factions led by the Phalangist Party, and the leftist Lebanese National Movement (LNM), which included Muslim militias and Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) forces.[7] By late October, leftist militias seized the Murr Tower, establishing a fortified vantage point overlooking Christian-controlled East Beirut.[8] In response, the Phalangists launched a counteroffensive, capturing the Holiday Inn and neighbouring hotels on 27 October.[9] As the battle dragged on, control of the hotel district moved between factions, with repeated ceasefires, evacuations, and offensives. By March 1976, after months of combat, leftist forces captured the Holiday Inn, marking both a strategic and psychological turning point in the conflict.[10]

The Battle of the Hotels was both strategic and symbolic. Control of the district offered commanding views of Beirut's port, central business areas, and key transport corridors. Architecturally, the high-rise hotels, most notably the twenty-six-storey Holiday Inn, the twenty-storey Phoenicia, and the unfinished forty-storey Murr Tower, offered unparalleled vertical dominance.[11] As Morrison and El Binni observe, the hotels became an 'epicentre of fierce, unrelenting fighting' as rival militias vied for control of these high points.[12] The battle's symbolic dimensions were equally potent. As Nadine Hindi argues, the seizure of the district by leftist militias, particularly under the banner of anti-capitalist resistance, represented an attack on the ideological heart of Beirut's bourgeois modernity.[13] The area's transformation into a militarised 'warscape' signalled the collapse of Beirut's cosmopolitan façade, exposing the sectarian and class divisions that underpinned the nation's fragile stability. At the centre of it all stood the Holiday Inn, watching, contested, impossible to ignore.

the vertical battlefield: the holiday inn and the politics of height

'You're about to be welcomed to one of the best hotels in the world', promised the 1978 Holiday Inn commercial.[14] 'The hotels with the best locations, near the things you want to be near.'[15] This advertisement captured the aspirations the Beirut Holiday Inn was meant to embody: luxury, internationalism, and spatial convenience. But in Beirut, the promise of panoramic luxury became a curse. Within a year of its opening, the hotel's 'best location' made it not a destination, but a target. As Beirut fractured into sectarian enclaves and the Green Line solidified, the Holiday Inn found itself positioned on contested high ground. Its

views extended over the coastline, the city centre, and the surrounding hotel district. What had been marketed as a panoramic asset was transformed into a military advantage [Fig. 01].

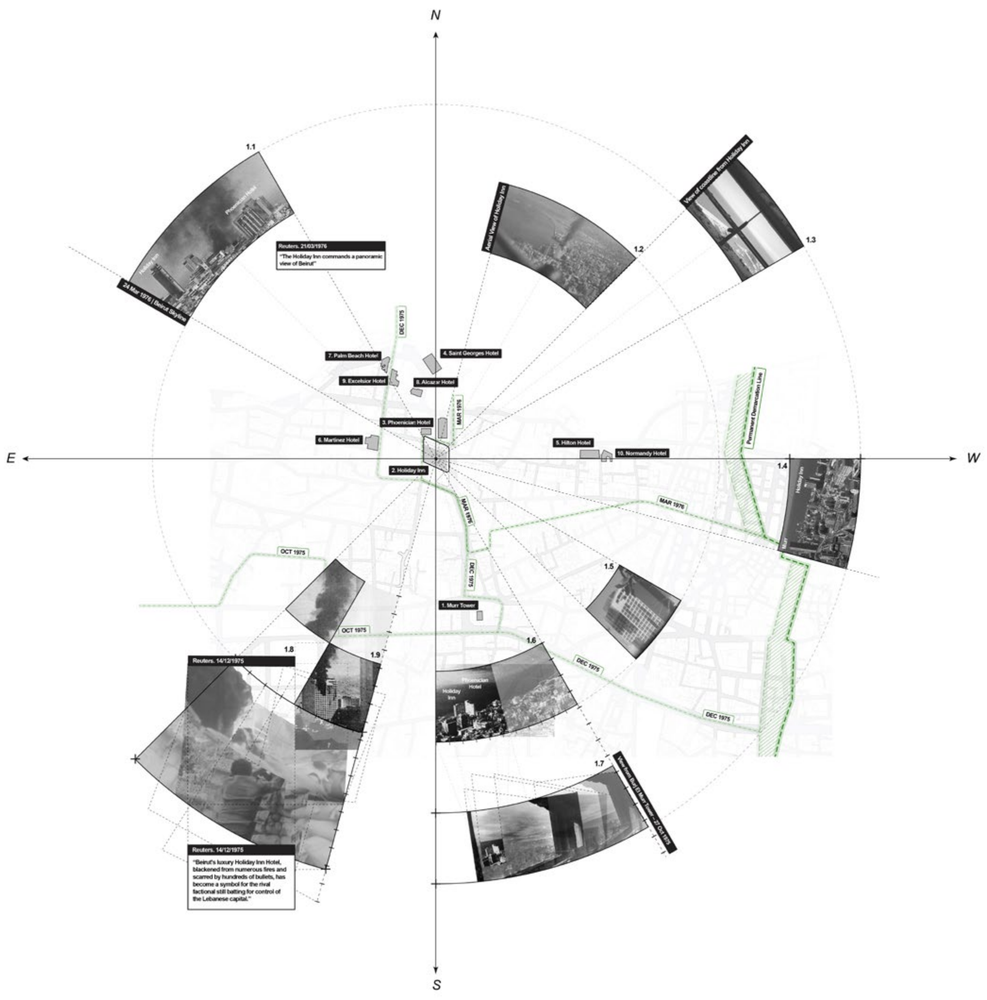


Figure 01.
Radial site plan of Beirut's hotel district showing the Holiday Inn's central position and its commanding views over the coastline, city centre, and adjacent hotels, with photographic vignettes illustrating key sightlines. Illustration: Endriana Audisho, 2025.

Militarily, this contest over elevation reflects what Weizman terms the *politics of verticality*. This spatial logic involves control exercised not only across horizontal boundaries but also vertically, from tunnels to rooftops and from sniper positions to airspace.[16] In *Hollow Land*, Weizman argues that architecture and planning have become 'tactical tools and the means of dispossession', operating through a layering of spatial regimes that allow for staggered control.[17] Within this framework, verticality is not metaphor. It is a physical and political infrastructure, the military colonisation of height and depth, of airspace and ground level, of what he calls an 'elastic geography.'[18]

In Beirut's hotel district, this vertical logic was violently enacted. As militias battled for territorial control, they moved upward and turned high-rise towers such as the Phoenicia, the Murr Tower, and the Holiday Inn into instruments of combat. 'The Holiday Inn would be central to this battle,' write Kenneth Morrison and Abdallah El Binni.[19] Standing twenty-six storeys high with generous balconies and a rooftop restaurant, it offered commanding views across multiple frontlines. Militants used its upper floors to launch sniper fire and observe enemy movements, exchanging heavy artillery with Murabitoun forces in the Murr Tower.[20] Control of the Holiday Inn granted tactical visibility. As Anthony Youssef notes, it became 'a critical node within a system of urban warfare', enabling occupants to 'possess and dominate' the surrounding landscape.[21] Its rooftop, once a symbol of leisure, became a military fortress. 'Control the Holiday Inn and you control the region around,' declared one reporter.[22] The battle was no longer about territory as surface. It had become a context of volume, where sovereignty was asserted through height and surveillance.[23]

The Holiday Inn's symbolism heightened its strategic importance. More than a building, it was an international chain hotel, a modernist icon of Lebanon's mid-century ambitions, and a visible landmark dominating the coastal skyline. As Camillo Boano and Dalia Chabarek note, the 'line of hotels and towers overlooking the area dominate the landscape', with the Holiday Inn 'loom[ing] large' over the battle below.[24] Its architectural prominence made it both a prize and a target, an emblem of modernity to be claimed or destroyed. The Battle of the Hotels was waged floor by floor, corridor by corridor, stairwell by stairwell. As Sara Fregonese remarked, 'the militia fighters started moving upwards', inaugurating a spatial logic of conflict that transformed modernist towers into scaffolds of violence.[25]

In this context, Weizman's theory of verticality is not abstract but materially grounded in Beirut's fractured skyline. The Holiday Inn exemplifies how buildings become war machines, not only sheltering combatants but extending the battlefield vertically, stratifying urban space, and reorganising the city's spatial and symbolic order. It was not

merely occupied. It was instrumentalised. In Beirut's vertical battlefield, architecture became strategy, and vision became power.

the occupied interior: architecture and the logics of war

If height transformed the Holiday Inn into a strategic stronghold, it was its interior that sustained its prolonged militarisation. From lobby to rooftop, the hotel's architecture was rapidly reprogrammed for war. Its volumetric complexity, modernist features, and generous spatial dimensions created both opportunity and vulnerability. As combatants moved vertically, they also advanced horizontally through the building. They occupied it room by room and stair by stair, rewriting the hotel's spatial logic in response to shifting tactical demands. Completed in 1974 by Maurice Hindie and André Wogenscky, the Holiday Inn was a late-modernist icon. Its plan was ambitious: a twenty-six-storey tower with a separate eight-storey annex, four underground levels, a cinema, rooftop restaurant, and more than 500 rooms. Perched on a steep incline in Ain Mreisseh, it cascaded toward the Mediterranean in a concrete mass.

But its grandeur made its collapse more symbolic. Within days of the onset of the Battle of the Hotels, the Holiday Inn's interior was transformed into a battlefield. Militias occupied the building not just for its height, but for the spatial affordances it offered inside: wide corridors, thick concrete walls, open-plan lobbies, and modular rooms [Fig. 02]. Designed for service and convenience, these features now enabled concealment, defence, and lethal mobility. Corridors became safe passageways, sheltering fighters from enemy fire; stairwells, often the only means of movement once electricity was lost, were strategic choke points. 'There was a corridor there, with blue carpet [...] We used to sit in the corridor,' recalled one former fighter.[26] The modularity of hotel rooms, designed for repetition and convenience, now enabled guerrilla tactics. Floors became layered zones of occupation: 'like a club sandwich,' one veteran remembered, 'one floor us, one floor them, one floor us.'[27] Combat took place in the thresholds between these units, transforming once-private suites into contested terrain.

The architecture of the hotels became an instrument in what Boano and Chabarek describe as a 'militarised dialogue' between opposing forces.[28] Each corridor, doorway, and window served not only as a spatial threshold but as a vector of communication and violence, turning interior circulation systems into tactical infrastructures. The vertical occupation produced a brutal reciprocity, fought floor by floor and view by view, where each movement triggered counter-movement in the city's newly weaponised spatial language.[29] The building's internal complexity further intensified

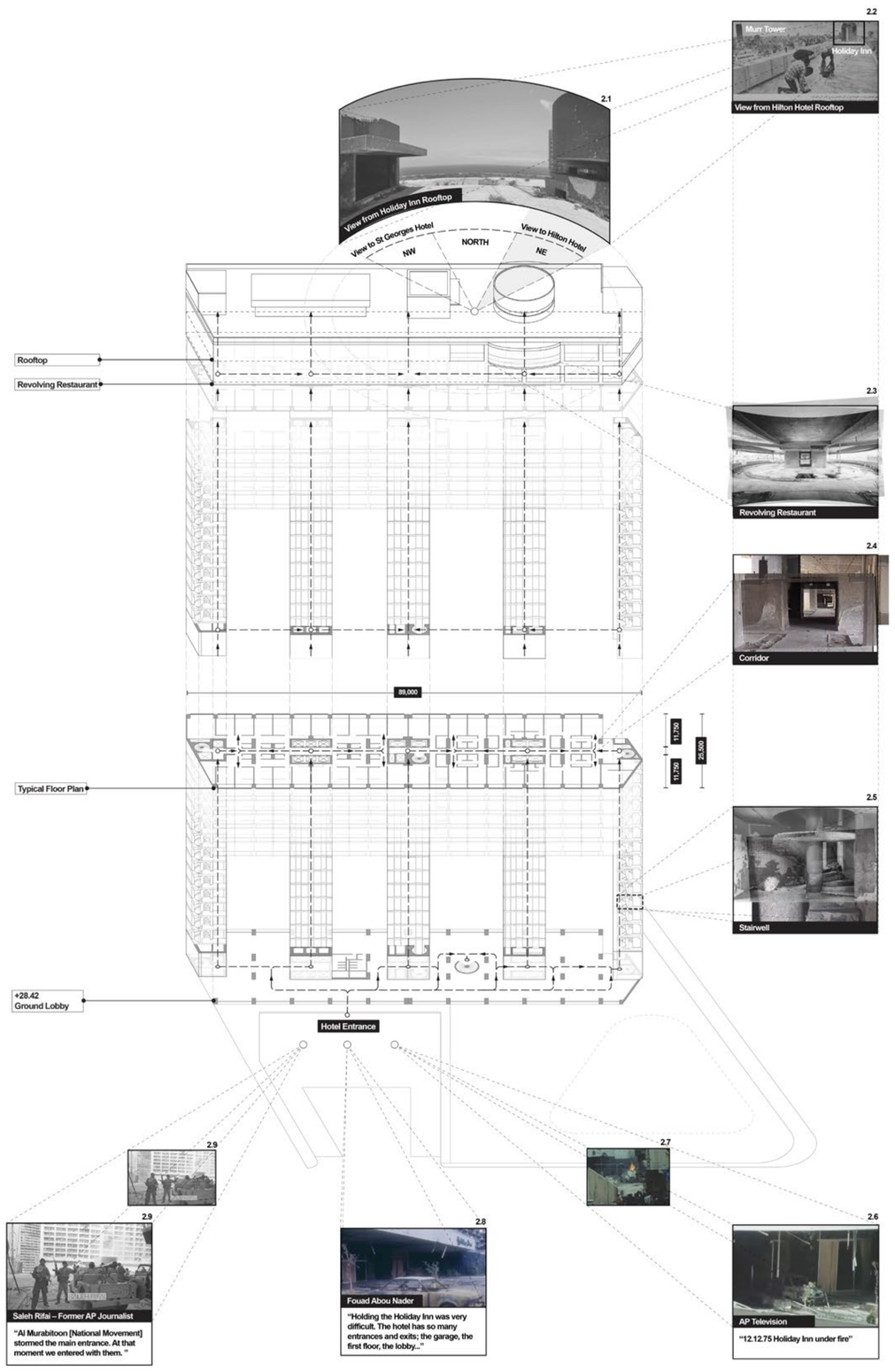


Figure 02.
Plan and sectional perspective of the Holiday Inn illustrating its complex interior organisation and circular routes that complicated control during the Battle of the Hotels. Illustration: Endriana Audisho, 2025.

the risks. 'Holding the Holiday Inn was very difficult,' recalled one Kataeb fighter.[30] 'The hotel had so many entrances and exits—the garage, the first floor, the lobby—that it was very hard to hold them all. Often, and this happened to me, we would walk down one floor because there was no elevator and come face to face with the enemy!'[31] Electricity and food supplies initially allowed some degree of self-sufficiency; generators powered outdoor spotlights, and the rooms — some of which had never been used — still held soft sheets and functioning televisions. But these amenities did little to offset the chaos unfolding within. The Holiday Inn's interior was not only a site of military occupation but a labyrinth of unexpected encounters and sudden violence, its spatial legibility dissolving under the pressures of war.

The building's materiality offered both protection and entrapment. Rocket-Propelled Grenades and recoilless rifles punctured the façade but rarely penetrated its concrete core.[32] 'Small arms fire pockmarked the Holiday Inn [...] without penetrating their cinderblock and thin, white rock curtain walls,' note Jureidini, McLaurin, and Price.[33] Militiamen turned these wounds into tactical apertures, enlarging holes for sniper positions, often concealed behind sandbags [Fig. 03]. Windows and bathroom skylights became loopholes: 'We transformed the

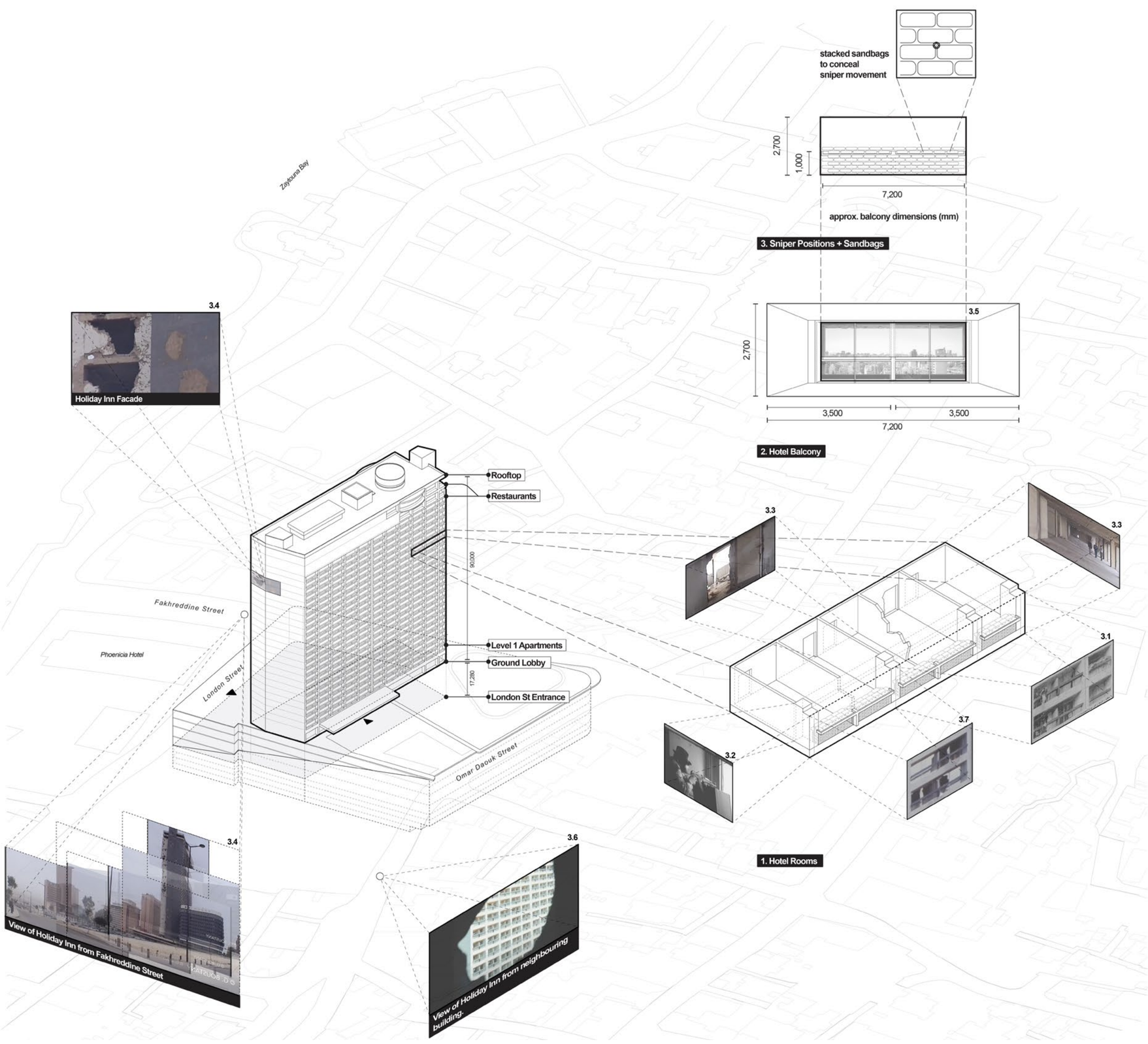


Figure 03.
Axonometric drawing of the Holiday Inn with exploded views of hotel rooms and balconies, showing how the building's spatial depth and stacked sandbags enabled concealed sniper movement and fortified occupation during the Battle of the Hotels. Illustration: Endriana Audisho, 2025.

bathroom skylights into loopholes,' one fighter explained, and 'used the debris to build noise traps so we could hear approaching attackers.'[34] Luxury suites became command posts. Lobbies became staging grounds. The infrastructure of hospitality was disassembled and retooled into a system of war.

This transformation was both tactical and symbolic. The Holiday Inn's lavish interiors, including chandeliers, minibars, and plush furnishings, were ransacked and destroyed. As Yasmina Ayuch documents, these were not acts of opportunism alone but of classed retribution. Many fighters had never stepped inside such spaces before the war: 'They destroyed all of the luxurious spaces and objects [...] as an expression of their opposition towards the upper class of the society and capitalism.'[35] The hotel's wealth, once inaccessible, became a site for the performance of revenge. This symbolic dismantling underscores Colomina's argument in *Privacy and Publicity* that there is no interior without a system of publicity.[36] The modern interior, she argues, is always mediated through mechanisms of display and representation rather than existing as a purely private realm.[37] In this sense, the Holiday Inn's suites, already staged as cosmopolitan spectacles before the war, were not only militarised but violently stripped of their representational role. The interior collapsed as both material space and spectacle, inverted through conflict.

Yet this dismantling was uneven. In the early stages of the battle, vestiges of the hotel's original function remained. Electricity still flowed, and elevators moved troops, weapons, and supplies between floors. When the power failed, fighters retreated upward, using linen stockpiles and untouched amenities to maintain temporary domesticity. 'The rooms, some of which had never been used [...] the soft sheets on the beds were new,' recalled one combatant.[38] 'The state-of-the-art televisions still broadcast entertainment programs that allowed them rare moments of respite.'[39] But these traces quickly gave way to ruin. On upper floors, dividing walls were torn down and suites stripped to concrete shells. 'From the upper floors and lush corridors,' wrote Silve-Dautremer, 'there are only ghostly rooms opening onto the Mediterranean [...] the countless bullet holes read like a musical score.'[40] Gilles Khoury compared the scene to a 'never-ending construction site.'[41] The aesthetic of late modernism, with its repetition, abstraction, and concrete massing, produced unintended consequences. Hospitality blurred into hostility.[42]

Weizman's spatial theory helps articulate these conditions. In *Hollow Land*, he argues that the built environment is not just passively damaged by conflict but weaponised through the manipulation of spatial form. Architectural features become 'tactical tools,' used to organise control and resistance across vertical and interior dimensions.[43] The Holiday Inn's volumetric complexity, its thresholds and partitions, and its nested circulation routes all enabled a form of conflict that was inseparable from the building's design. These spatial tactics were not ephemeral. A once-classified 1979 report, *Military Operations in Select Lebanese Built-Up Areas*, commissioned by the US Department of Defense, analysed the Holiday Inn as a case study in high-rise urban warfare.[44] It mapped building typologies, vertical movement, and patterns of occupation. What began as a tactical improvisation evolved into a prototype for future military doctrine.

The internal collapse of spatial clarity mirrored the fragmentation of the city beyond. As militias turned corridors into kill zones and bedrooms into bunkers, the architecture absorbed the war's fluid, unstable, and internally divided logic. Weizman describes this as a 'territorial hologram,' in which civilian and military, public and private, built and ruined, blur.[45] The Holiday Inn embodied this collapse. Its interiors reflected not only occupation but the dissolution of social and spatial order. By March 1976, when leftist forces finally seized the Holiday Inn, the interior was no longer recognisable. Smoke billowed from broken walls, the façades blackened and bullet pocked. 'Sixteen rightist gunmen were left [...] many were slain,' reported James Markham.[46]

‘More than a dozen were shot down as they tried to flee. At least two defenders were thrown to their deaths from upper floors.’[47] A flag was hoisted over the charred structure in an act that marked both victory and eulogy. The Holiday Inn was never reopened. Today, its skeletal frame remains visible in the Beirut skyline, a decaying relic of the war and a monument to the transformation of architecture under siege.

case study two — the mediatised interior: the al-rashid hotel, baghdad

operation desert storm: mediating war from the al-rashid hotel

Midnight, 16 January 1991, was the deadline issued by the United Nations Security Council for Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, which began on 2 August 1990, stemmed from complex economic and territorial disputes, including Iraq’s longstanding territorial claims over Kuwait, accusations of oil theft, and tensions over unpaid debts incurred during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988). Kuwait’s refusal to forgive those debts intensified the conflict.[48] Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz framed these grievances as justification for what Iraq considered the reclamation of lost territory and access to a Gulf port.[49]

As the deadline approached, news organisations such as CNN, ABC, NBC, and CBS raced to deploy correspondents to the region, determined to broadcast the first images of the conflict.[50] Despite advancements in video technology, many doubted live frontline reporting would be achievable, given strict censorship and news management imposed by Iraq, the United States, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Great Britain.[51] Unlike the relative freedom of the Vietnam War era, the Gulf War enforced ‘pool’ reporting, military minders, and pre-approved content, delaying and filtering journalistic output.[52] Pentagon officials were explicit: this would not be ‘another Vietnam,’ where uncensored coverage was blamed for undermining US public support.[53] Yet the Gulf War marked a decisive development

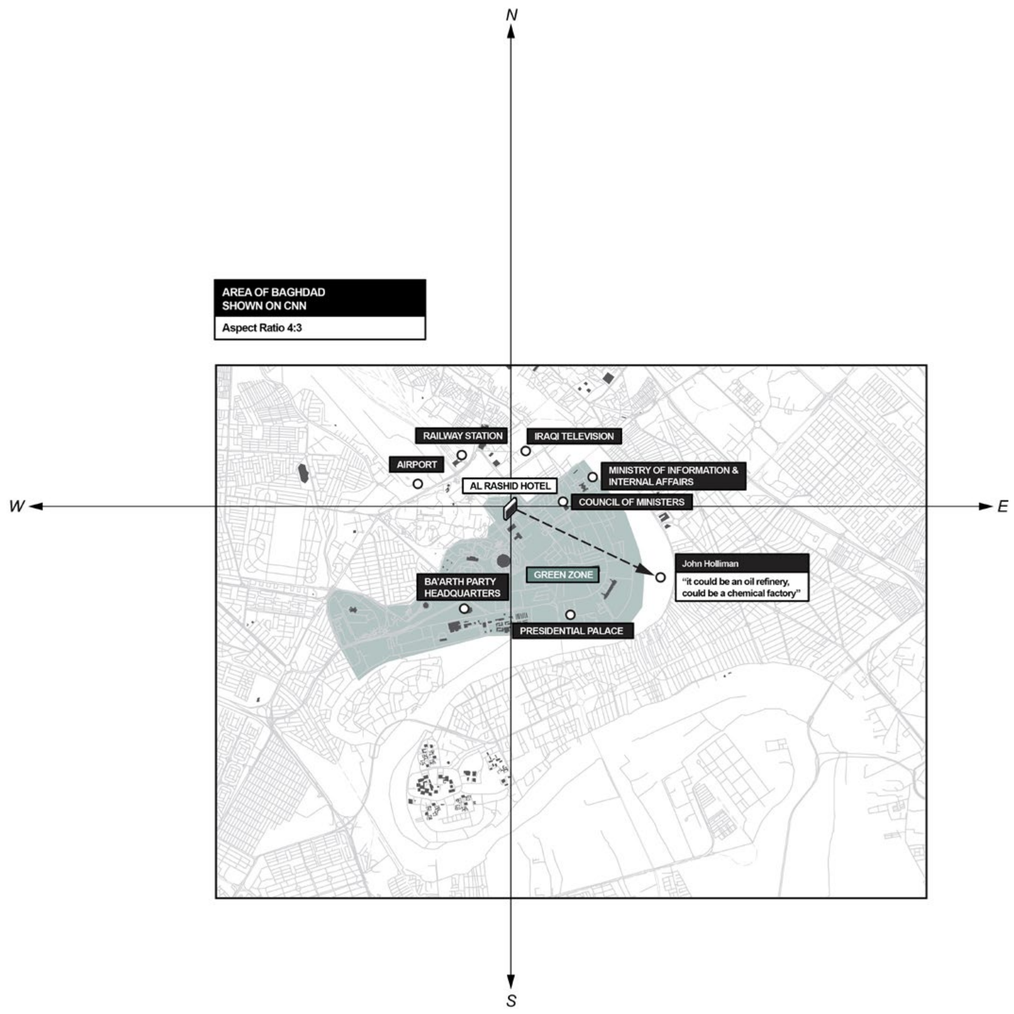


Figure 04.
Site plan situating the Al-Rashid Hotel relative to CNN’s area of coverage in Baghdad, with attention to the directionality and orientation of journalist John Holliman’s speculative observation of distant smoke. Illustration: Endriana Audisho, 2025.

in the relationship between media and conflict. Technological advances such as satellite communications, GPS, and real-time broadcast capability enabled continuous global coverage. CNN, founded in 1980, positioned itself to capitalise on this shift, determined to deliver twenty-four-hour live reports from the war zone.

At the centre of this transformation was Baghdad’s Al-Rashid Hotel. Completed in 1982 during the Iran-Iraq War as a symbol of Iraq’s stability, the fourteen-storey hotel was originally constructed to host the Non-Aligned Movement conference, later relocated due to regional instability. Its location in Baghdad’s city centre made it a logical base for the foreign press [Fig. 04]. When Iraq failed to withdraw by the UN deadline, the US-led coalition launched ‘Operation Desert Storm’ on 17 January 1991, marking the official start of the Gulf War. From the ninth floor of the Al-Rashid, CNN correspondents Bernard Shaw, Peter Arnett, and John Holliman — quickly dubbed the ‘Boys of Baghdad’ — broadcast live coverage of the war’s opening hours.[54] Rival networks struggled

as they relied on local hotel phone lines that failed when the war began.[55] CNN, however, had secured a privileged four-wire telephone line, independent of Iraq's switchboard.[56] This advantage, reportedly arranged through CNN producer Robert Weiner's relationship with Iraqi Minister of Information Naji al-Hadithi, allowed CNN to maintain uninterrupted communication.[57] While other journalists sheltered in the hotel basement, CNN remained in their upper-floor suite, providing live audio reports. In the days that followed, the Al-Rashid Hotel became a key node in the war's media infrastructure. Its interiors were reconfigured to support continuous, real-time coverage, an unprecedented development in the history of journalism.

eye-witnessing from the interior ('something is happening outside')

CNN made journalism history with the first conflict broadcast live and continuously. Its twenty-four-hour coverage across global time zones marked a significant shift. As CNN's Ed Turner noted, news is dead if not delivered 'within the same time cycle.'[58] Continuous, unedited coverage created a sense of immediacy, positioning viewers alongside reporters with 'front-row seats' to war. As Peter Arnett reflected, 'It's pretty unique in journalistic history to have a front-row seat to one of the great air bombardments in history.'[59] This front-row experience was reinforced by CNN's Atlanta anchor Susan Rock, who reminded audiences that 'we are seeing this video as you are [...] it is important that you see it immediately.'[60] The alignment between reporter and viewer created the illusion of shared presence in real-time, as though the audience occupied the same room. This dynamic transformed both journalism and public engagement with conflict, as the need for constant sensation and rolling news became an integral part of contemporary consumer culture.[61]

Yet this breakthrough in journalism also exposed the fragility of real-time reporting. The coverage, though live, was transmitted primarily through audio, with commentary forming the main evidentiary base. The reporters themselves were eye-witnessing the conflict from within the hotel's interior, but for global audiences their observations were mediated aurally, collapsing visual witnessing into sound. As Stephen Cushion and Justin Lewis observe, reporters operating through live, unscripted formats become 'almost like witnesses at the scene of an accident [...] forced to speculate on what they could see.'[62] For the 'Boys of Baghdad', confinement to their hotel suite transformed eye witnessing into a speculative, spatially restricted act, limited to observing the city through the architectural boundaries of their hotel room. The result was a constant negotiation between the discipline of journalistic objectivity and the unavoidable subjectivity of first-person, continuous reporting.

Fear, uncertainty, and moments of banter surfaced throughout the broadcast, underscoring this tension. As the opening airstrikes began, Shaw exclaimed, 'It has been one hell of a night [...] when the bombs fell and exploded, it shook you to your soul.'[63] At another moment, Holliman joked that Shaw had retreated downstairs to safety, but 'We like the view higher up.'[64] Moments later, the gravity of the situation returned: 'It's very quiet outside [...] a few cars speeding down the main drag [...] no more anti-aircraft fire.'[65] The reporters' vulnerability frequently clashed with the demands of their task. Shaw's eerie description of the city — 'The sky over Baghdad is black [...] there is a cool breeze blowing through the window here' — followed by 'It occurs to me that I didn't get dinner tonight', with Arnett adding, 'We have tuna fish, crackers, and water.'[66] These fragments of casual conversation underscored the psychological strain of continuous live reporting under siege, as the domestic interior of the hotel room collapsed into the spectacle and uncertainty of war.

The Al-Rashid Hotel itself shaped the conditions of this reporting. Its location in Baghdad's city centre offered prime visibility but also imposed spatial and visual constraints. Eight hours into the coverage, Holliman looked outside an eastern-facing window and described a distant smoke cloud: 'It could be an oil refinery, could be a chemical factory.'[67] Despite being physically present in Baghdad, the correspondents

remained spatially distanced, confined within the architecture of the hotel. As Arnett later explained, 'We can report to you basically what we can see from this hotel [...] we can actually see a lot, but we can't look south of the border of Kuwait or Saudi Arabia.'[68] The hotel's elongated, north-south orientation, with windows oriented only to the east and west, further restricted their field of vision. Environmental conditions compounded this ambiguity. As smoke drifted across the skyline, Holliman reported, 'There is a huge cloud of white smoke pouring out [...] it has made it very difficult for us to see outside of our windows.'[69] The city beyond remained unseen, described only through sound, flickering light, and speculation. When power failed across Baghdad, explosions provided the only illumination. 'The sky is lighting up to the south [...] we can only presume there is another attack coming in,' they reported.[70] Their language exposed the speculative and uncertain nature of witnessing war from within the hotel's interior.

As the hotel room shed its function as a site of temporary accommodation, it became a generic, spatially constrained interior that had to be actively navigated to construct an external narrative. The interior and its archetypes became the instruments of reportage [Fig. 05]. The 1.2 m high by 3.8 m wide strip window framed the act of eye witnessing; the 4m by 7.5 m hotel room operated as a makeshift broadcast studio; the 2.5 m wide corridor became a passage for repositioning within the interior, offering access to alternative orientations and fragmented panoramas of the city. The limits of visibility and the spatial organisation of the Al-Rashid directly shaped the reporting, with correspondents repeatedly referencing the hotel's architecture to ground their commentary [Fig. 06]. 'We're going over to the window now to see what we can see,' Holliman announced minutes into the coverage, followed quickly by, 'I'm getting away from the window here now,' as crackling sounds interrupted the report.[71] This choreography of approaching and retreating underscored the window's dual role as both aperture and threshold, simultaneously affording vision and exposing danger. This condition exemplifies what Colomina identifies as the modern picture window: 'it turns the outside world into an image to be consumed by those inside [...] but it also displays the image of the interior to that of the world.'[72] CNN's broadcasts depended on this reciprocity: the reporters consumed Baghdad as image through the window, while global audiences consumed the hotel interior staged as the new front line.

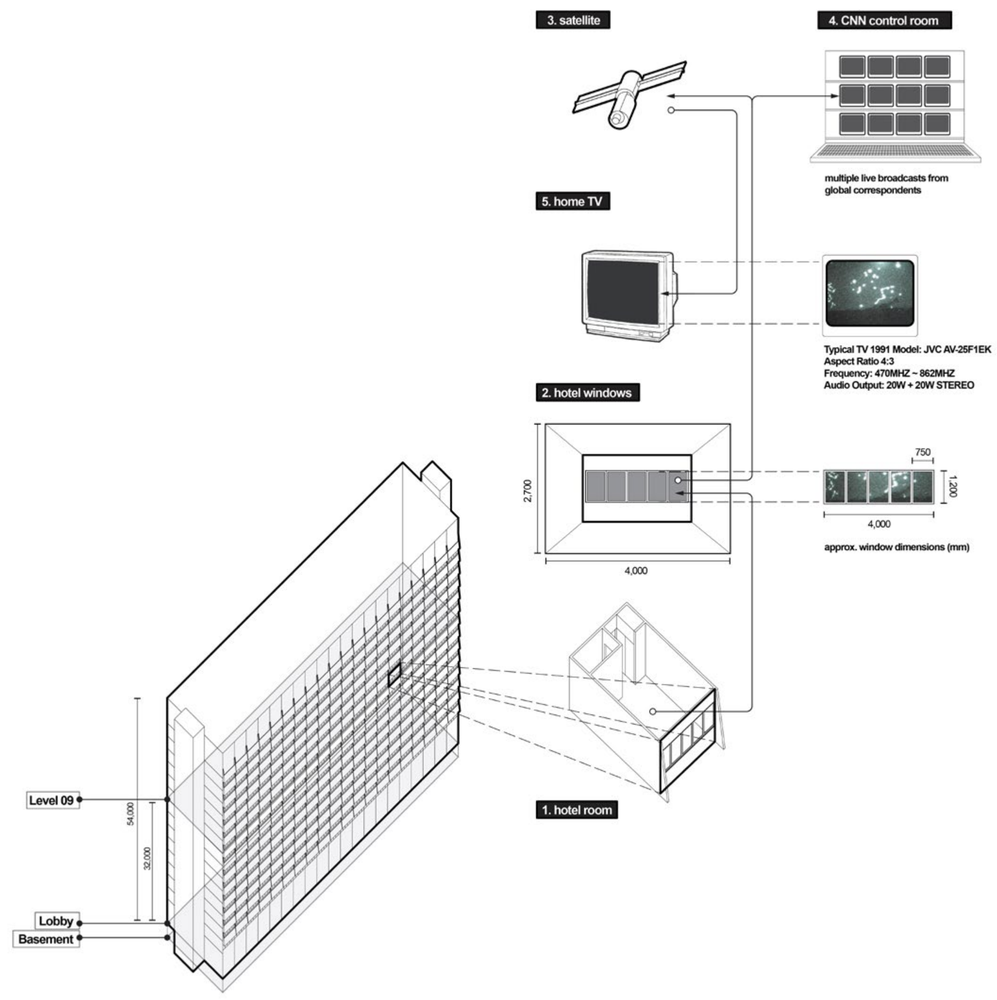


Figure 05.
Axonometric of the Al-Rashid Hotel connecting its rooms and windows to CNN's broadcast infrastructure of control rooms, satellites, and domestic televisions. Illustration: Endriana Audisho, 2025.

The corridor, typically a mundane element of circulation, became crucial for repositioning. 'I'm going to crawl [via the corridor] to the other side of the hotel,' Shaw remarked, seeking an alternative vantage.[73] At one point, Holliman extended his microphone cord to 'travel more distance through this place and give you a better outlook from all sides of the hotel.'[74] Here, 'outlook' referred not to vision, but to audio transmission, as the microphone was held outside the window. Ultimately, the spatial boundaries of the hotel conditioned how Baghdad was seen, heard, and speculatively described. 'We don't know how much of the city has been targeted, but nothing near the hotel,' Holliman observed, exposing the proximity limits of their field of view.[75] The correspondents used the building boundary as

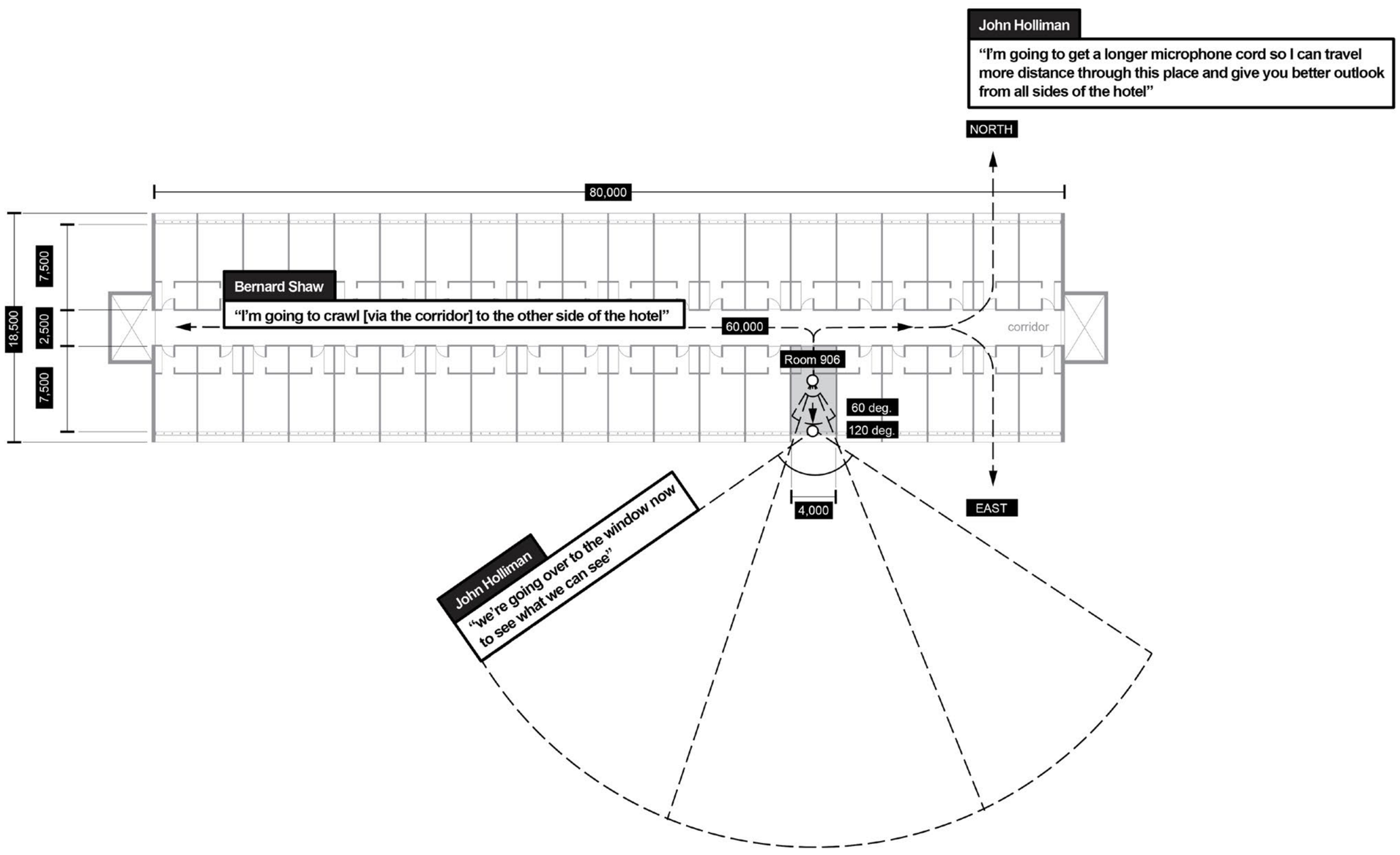


Figure 06.
Plan of the Al-Rashid Hotel's ninth floor showing reporters' vantage points and movements during live coverage of the Gulf War. Illustration: Endriana Audisho, 2025.

a perimeter from which to survey what little they could. At times, when it became unsafe to approach the windows, Shaw narrated their dislocated vantage: 'To paint the picture for you of where we are physically right now, we are in the hall, on the floor, and we can look at open hotel doors to see either side [of the hotel], and it has suddenly fallen quiet again over the skies of Baghdad.'[76]

Within these architectural boundaries, reporting collapsed into a choreography of partial views, nervous repositioning, and speculative commentary. The Al-Rashid was no longer simply a hotel; its interiors framed a volatile spatial logic where journalism, spectacle, and warfare converged. Bernard Shaw's now-iconic statement captured this ambiguity: 'Something is happening outside.'[77] The phrase tethered the hotel's interior to the conflict beyond, yet exposed the speculative, disembodied nature of their engagement. Without direct access to the frontlines, the correspondents navigated both space and language from within the hotel's confines, waiting for the visible evidence of war to breach their narrow field of perception. In doing so, they transformed the Al-Rashid from a temporary shelter into a media apparatus. It became an architectural threshold through which the spectacle of real-time war was constructed and transmitted to a global audience.

As Colomina later argued in *Domesticity at War*, during the Gulf War 'CNN literally advertised itself with "CNN brings you the frontline to your living room" [...] The war that is the domestic both occupies and is about this complex space.'[78] The Al-Rashid suite exemplified this condition: its strip windows framed vision, its walls and corridors supported the infrastructure of transmission, and its furnishings were repurposed as a broadcast studio. The hotel room thus operated simultaneously as stage and apparatus, collapsing distance between battlefield and domesticity and tethering the spectacle of war to a familiar typology of everyday life.

the spectacle of war: real-time, simulation, and the disappearance of space

If the interiors of the Al-Rashid Hotel defined the spatial limits of CNN's reporting, it was the architecture of the screen that shaped how the war was consumed globally. The hotel's physical boundaries were transposed onto the mediated distance of the screen. CNN's opening line, 'We're going to Baghdad now because we can,' set up a seductive proposition: that proximity to conflict was now achievable in real-time.[79] Yet early coverage was saturated with absence. Despite reporting from Baghdad, CNN's broadcasts offered no real images of the conflict. Instead, audio fragments were layered over vague diagrams, outdated maps, and static graphics that predated the war. Even the iconic phosphor-green night-vision footage that aired days after the initial airstrikes undermined the idea of liveness.[80]

The screen functioned as both conduit and filter. While it promised to bring Baghdad into the homes of a global audience, it simultaneously constructed distance. This was a mode of viewing mediated through what Virilio terms *teleobservation*.[81] This distance emerged not only from physical separation but also from the fragmented medium. CNN's coverage oscillated between disconnected audio, transposed visuals, and multiple correspondent locations, with sterile maps of Iraq and Baghdad serving as placeholders. These maps offered a view of Baghdad as abstracted zones — the Al-Rashid Hotel, the Presidential Palace, the International Communications Centre — never as a lived city under siege.

This visual strategy aligned with what Baudrillard describes as *simulation*: the substitution of signs for the real, where the representation becomes detached from any original referent.[82] Unlike representation, which attempts to reflect reality, simulation collapses that distinction, constructing what Baudrillard terms *hyperreality*.[83] In the Gulf War, Baghdad was consumed through speculative maps, diagrammatic overlays, and disjointed live feeds. The city was reduced to signs at a distance, and the coverage itself became a deterrence to the real image of war. Baudrillard argued that the flood of images and commentary fragmented perception, leaving no time for reflection.[84] War became less about evidence, more about interpretation.

Real-time broadcasting amplified this effect. Virilio's critique of *real-time* underscores this shift, arguing that what happens more quickly is perceived less clearly. In the Gulf War, real space was displaced by real-time spectacle, and geography was overtaken by what Virilio terms *dromology*, a logic of speed.[85] The boundary between 'here' and 'there' collapsed into a two-dimensional spectacle with a third dimension of time represented by CNN's rolling broadcast. It became, as Virilio put it, 'a world war in miniature', mediated entirely by the screen.[86] Images and sounds moved too quickly to be analysed, reducing violence to its simplest form: an image.[87] Traditional logics of perception broke down, and the virtual world prevailed over the real one.

Baudrillard pushed further, claiming provocatively with the title of his book that 'The Gulf War Did Not Take Place.'[88] He pointed to the lack of real images, the absence of Iraqi perspectives, and delayed footage as evidence of the war's transformation into hyperreality. He asked, 'How is it that a real war did not generate real images?'[89] The grainy phosphor-green imagery that came to be emblematic of the Gulf War intensified this sense of abstraction, producing what *The New Yorker* described as an 'eerie, remote control quality.'[90] For Baudrillard, the war became a *non-event*, a war turned into pure information and endless speculation.[91] Viewers became, in his words, 'hostages of media intoxication', trapped in a voyeuristic relation to the war and bombarded by the technological sublime of real-time transmission.[92] The screen was no longer a neutral interface but a site of power that shaped perception and produced political subjectivities. Virilio warned that we must 'not believe our eyes.'[93] The electronic war, he argued, is not neutral. It is a war of images and sounds that has displaced earlier forms of warfare and restructured the politics of vision itself.[94]

In this light, the Gulf War's mediated interior reveals a new spatial logic of conflict, where architecture is not a passive backdrop but an active participant in the global media apparatus. The spatial constraints of the Al-Rashid, coupled with the temporal compression of real-time broadcast, produced a spectacle in which the city was consumed more as fragmented simulation than as a material reality. Ultimately, the Al-Rashid Hotel reveals how questions of visibility, occupation, and representation converge in ways that disrupt and reorganise the spatial and political order of the city.

conclusion: war rooms and the architecture of conflict

In times of war, hotel interiors — designed for comfort, transience, and cosmopolitan aspiration — undergo radical transformation. In Beirut and Baghdad, architecture did not collapse under conflict; it adapted, becoming both durable and vulnerable. The Holiday Inn was converted into a vertical stronghold, its corridors and modular rooms sustaining prolonged occupation and classed retribution. The Al-Rashid, by contrast, became a mediatised control room, its strip windows and suites conditioning how the war was narrated and consumed in real time. These episodes reveal interiors as contingent infrastructures, where the plan dissolves into a choreography of improvised action, visibility, and survival.

To make sense of these transformations, this essay develops and advances composite analytic drawing as both method and critique. By assembling fragments — photographs, transcripts, memories — into spatial accounts, these drawings do not merely illustrate but interpret. They foreground absence, speculation, and contradiction as intrinsic to documenting interiors under siege. In doing so, they push representational practice beyond idealised plans and perspectives, offering interior discourse a way of working with instability, speed, and contingency.

The hotel interior, then, is not a backdrop to crisis but a volatile interface between design and improvisation, privacy and politics, materiality and spectacle. Situated within the call of *Unplanned Interiors*, these cases resonate more broadly: whether shaped by conflict, political unrest, or climatic disruption, interiors are continually rewritten by forces they cannot anticipate but must nonetheless contain. War rooms remind us that the task of interior discourse lies not only in the plan but in confronting the unplanned, where architecture is forged as much through rupture as through design.

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author biography

Dr Endriana Audisho is a lecturer and public programs director at the School of Architecture, University of Technology Sydney (UTS). Her research and teaching practice draw on post-colonial and decolonial frameworks to expose spatial and social injustices, while also proposing alternative architectural narratives, fictions, and imaginaries.

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open design for unplanned narratives: fala atelier's oneiric realms and post-digital representation

Andrea Crudeli
The University of Pisa
0000-0002-6467-2506

abstract

FALA Atelier, based in Lisbon, Portugal, has established itself over the past decade as a leading practice exploring the relationship between post-digital visual languages and design in architecture. Under the leadership of Filipe Magalhães, Ana Luisa Soares, and Ahmed Belkhodja, the studio's work, documented in international monographs including *2G*, uses collage and photomontage techniques to generate dreamlike representations of domestic space that resist conventional realism. While FALA's aesthetic and representational strategies have been widely discussed, this paper focuses on a less examined aspect of their work: the social and spatial openness inherent in their unbuilt competition proposals.

Through critical analysis of three residential competition projects (n.172, n.46, and n.191), this research investigates how FALA's approach to design and drawing constructs unplanned interior scenarios, spaces that resist prescriptive planning and invite unanticipated patterns of use and occupation. These projects, marked by flexible layouts, ambiguous zoning, and narrative-driven collages, suggest open-ended possibilities for domestic life. Their visual strategies frame interiors not as static backdrops for predefined activities but as speculative environments for emergent social behaviours and collective inhabitation.

By examining FALA's unpublished competition drawings through the lens of open design and unplanned interior life, this paper connects post-digital representational methods with broader spatial practices that foreground adaptability, temporality, and user agency. FALA's work thus contributes to current architectural discourse on how interiors can accommodate, and even encourage, the shifting moral geographies, social dynamics, and unanticipated domestic configurations of contemporary life.

keywords

FALA Atelier; collage; post-digital; oneiric architecture; unplanned

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introduction: the post-digital generation

In the article 'Architecture Enters the Age of Post-Digital Drawing' published in *Metropolis* magazine, Sam Jacob explores the evolving paradigm of architectural representation known as post-digital drawing. He highlights how this kind of architectural representation signifies a shift away from purely photo-realistic digital renderings toward a style that embraces the artifice and representational qualities of drawing itself, often opening up space for ambiguity, unresolved spatial programmes, and indeterminate interior scenarios.[1] The idea of post-digital, as a creative genre, originated in the year 2000 when musician Kim Cascone coined the term to describe a movement of self-taught composers in electronic music who experimented with digital technology failures, using glitches, bugs, and system crashes in their work.[2]

Concurrently, media artist Ian Andrews expanded the term to post-digital aesthetics, which critiqued the goal of achieving 'perfect' representation, such as photo-realism, with digital technologies in the fields of art.[3] Due to the global financial crisis, several factors made designing and working particularly challenging for young architects at the beginning of the 2010s. Among the various consequences, post-digital drawing has emerged as a recognised genre in architectural representation that uses anachronistic tools to resist visual conformity in the face of continued economic and global pressures on emerging architects' creative pursuits.

One significant quality of post-digital drawing in architecture is the balance of new digital technologies with the thoughtful application of mechanical and manual techniques, such as hand drawing. This approach aims to harness the best of both by foregrounding the process of drawing as active and creative constructs of architectural imagination, rather than mere depictions of future realities. Unlike the earlier digital turn, which often emphasised the novelty and power of digital tools, the post-digital movement adopts a more relaxed manner, incorporating technology without being overwhelmed or defined by it.[4] The surge of this drawing style reflects a broader critique of the dominance of hyper-realism in digital renderings, which often prioritises visual fidelity over conceptual and contextual richness, frequently neglecting the social unpredictability and unplanned occupation patterns that interiors may host over time. Instead, post-digital drawings celebrate the ordinary, employing flatness, texture overlays, and muted colours to evoke nostalgia and critique the ubiquity of digital techniques in contemporary life.

After an initial moment of perplexity and even distrust from architecture critics, who underestimated the impact this 'retro' visual language could have, the concept of post-digital drawing became an important trend in the emerging generation of architects.[5] In the 2010s, the online platform KoozArch played a pivotal role in the development of post-digital architecture by creating a space where traditional drawing techniques intersect with digital innovations.[6] Following the various international designers who popularised its compositional qualities, sub-categories of this visual language began to emerge. Common to these sub-categories was the fusion of conventional techniques of collage-making with sophisticated digital techniques, resulting in intricate and visually arresting compositions that enhance the communication of architectural ideas and concepts. Further, post-digital drawing shared an emphasis on the inclusion of narrative elements and historical art references similar to collage representation techniques that emerged in architectural drawing during the 1970s and 1980s, thereby making room for multiple interpretations of use, social flexibility, and the representation of non-prescriptive interior futures. Several significant sources commonly referenced include Mies van der Rohe's one-point perspectives and the metaphysical paintings of Giorgio de Chirico.[7]

Mario Carpo, in his book *The Second Digital Turn*, critiques contemporary architects' renewed interest in anachronistic techniques, and connects the post-digital phenomenon to postmodernism but highlights a key difference: whereas postmodernists had a programmatic aversion to technology, post-digital architects are indifferent to it.[8] In his article 'Post-Digital Quitters' he describes:

> If we don't care about technology today, it is not because there is no technology out there, but because there is too much of it; it's not because we are bored, it's because we are quitters. And, as always, if architects stop caring about technology, someone else will in their stead.[9]

The issue of reviving a postmodern language, or at least the visual strategies of collage, juxtaposition, and superimposition, has led to the consolidation of post-digital compositional techniques. This has undoubtedly increased the applicability of this new visual language, making its works recognisable and reproducible, and creating an evolving iconography that applies analogue compositional techniques from a generation earlier in new ways. As Pedro Bandeira explains:

> One thing is for certain: postmodernism as a structure of thoughts had the virtue of encompassing all the apparent contradictions we are able to recognise in contemporary Architecture.[10]

Today, architects utilise post-digital drawings to investigate diverse design possibilities, articulate design concepts to clients or stakeholders, and craft visually engaging presentations and marketing collateral. This technique also serves as a medium for experimenting with different material and colour combinations and evaluating the aesthetic impact of design choices before the commencement of construction. Among the various firms that have adopted a post-digital language, a non-exhaustive list includes Point Supreme, OFFICE KGDVS, Dogma, Elli Mossayebi, Maio Architects, and Baukuh.[11] However, the most important among them is certainly FALA Atelier, which, unlike the others, has translated this language into a working method that is reflected in its realised designs, and more significantly, in its unbuilt projects, where interior indeterminacy, user-driven appropriation, and the spatial conditions for unplanned habitation become central design themes.

the case of fala atelier

FALA Atelier, based in Lisbon, Portugal, has emerged over the past fifteen years as a pioneering force within contemporary architecture, under the leadership of Filipe Magalhães, Ana Luisa Soares, and Ahmed Belkhodja [Fig. 01]. The three architects first met in 2011 while working at Harry Gugger Studio in Basel. Magalhães, originally from Porto, and Soares, from its surrounding suburbs, share Portuguese roots, while Belkhodja is Swiss. Their diverse educational trajectories span architectural schools in Porto, Lausanne, Zurich, Ljubljana, Tokyo, Gothenburg, and Singapore, reflecting a breadth of international influences. Further professional experience in Japan also shaped their design sensibilities: Magalhães worked at SANAA, Soares at Toyo Ito, and Belkhodja at Atelier Bow-Wow.[12] Like many young professionals from Southern Europe, Magalhães and Soares left Portugal in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis in search of better economic opportunities abroad. After securing well-paid and stable positions in Switzerland, they made the deliberate decision to return to Porto at the height of the recession, inviting Belkhodja to join them. Confronted with a saturated local job market and intense competition among the city's many architects, they initially focused on taking on small-scale residential projects as a way to establish their practice.



Figure 01.
FALA Atelier's lecture (Filipe Magalhães and Ana Luisa Soares) at 'Reuse the Ruin Summer Workshop' in Florence, 2023, in which they are explaining the references of Japanese architecture in their works. Photograph: Andrea Crudeli, 2023.

Throughout the 2010s, many young architects working in Porto were influenced by the Porto School, contributing to the development of a recognisable and cohesive architectural language within the city.[13] While FALA Atelier is inevitably connected to this lineage, their work introduces significant departures in both content and approach. Rather than adhering strictly to the school's established dogmas, FALA engages in a critical reinterpretation, offering a retrospective, almost revisionist lens on the Porto School tradition. Their signature 'back-to-the-future' visual language incorporates postmodern strategies, characterised by the juxtaposition and superimposition of historically disassociated compositional elements. This deliberate act of intellectual disobedience has enabled FALA to cultivate an independent architectural voice within the broader context of Portuguese architecture. Tibor Joanelly explains that 'FALA's projects may be characterised by a strong tendency towards autonomy.'[14] Believing architecture is a profession aimed at combining elements, not separating them, FALA uses its distinct visual language to critique the reductive and repetitive appearance of hyper-realistic architectural representation, common to large, global architecture practices.[15] Further, unlike other architectural firms in Europe that use a post-digital visual language solely for its representational dimension, FALA conveys an abstract compositional quality of drawings in its realised works, aligning its collage images with the final photographs of each project, demonstrating the true novelty of the studio.

This application of FALA Atelier's post-digital technique to drawing in its realised works can also be seen from a political perspective. By predominantly opting to renovate, rather than rebuild, urban projects, the compositional techniques of juxtaposing and superimposing historical elements in drawings carries through to its buildings. This critical approach enables FALA to act in opposition within the building industry, which generally favours the higher profits of new constructions following demolitions.[16] It allows the firm to challenge the status quo of architectural practice by proposing alternatives to new city construction. In doing so, FALA also opens its interiors to processes of spatial indeterminacy, allowing for future unplanned adaptations by users and unforeseen modes of occupancy over time.

Regarding technical drawings, the architects minimally use basic digital tools like Photoshop and AutoCAD, focusing on creating images that resemble handmade representations. This visual strategy reinforces spatial ambiguity and leaves room for multiple interior scenarios to be imagined and enacted by future occupants: in their designs for residential interiors, for instance, they manipulate existing conditions in Photoshop to overlay new material textures, plants, and objects from a singular viewpoint, as 'an accumulation of tropes of good painterly taste.'[17] In this sense, they produce plans and collage one-point perspectives constructed to enhance cosmetic beauty, and emphasise the labour and effort put into each detail.[18] This graphic method corresponds to the specific design choices that find their mirrored representation in the building.

The firm frequently proposes sequences of spaces with different types of furniture in an attempt to demonstrate the transient nature of human

existence compared to architecture. Material surfaces, attached to walls, floors, or ceilings, are designed to be easily removable and replaceable. Inspired by Taro Igarashi's superflat concept and the cult of surfaceness, FALA employs surface play to animate interiors, so that 'the entire structure of FALA's oeuvre is more rhizomic in kind, with like things appearing as different constellations on the surfaces of their design.'[19] This tactic transforms interior renovation strategies into opportunities for frequent authorial gestures. It invites contradiction and imagination, drawing from avant-garde art movements such as Dadaism and Surrealism, the experimental architectural imagery of Italian Radicals like Superstudio and Archizoom, the British group Archigram, and Josef Kaiser's photomontages.

The Italian critic Davide Tommaso Ferrando describes the post-digital drawing style of FALA Atelier as a unique kind of 'illustration' that 'leave[s] a gap between the representation and the represented.'[20] Ferrando explains that FALA's 'deliberate staging of project photographs, which meticulously mimic the composition of their drawings to the extent that photos and drawings become indistinguishable, creates an epistemological conundrum where the boundaries between the drawn, the photographed, and the constructed blur.'[21] Ferrando compares this illustrative approach to the work of David Hockney, and its 'same kind of flatness that [...] is not neutral but instead productive of a particular conception of space.'[22]

FALA strongly emphasises the emotional and experiential impact of the interior spaces it designs. There is an overarching intention to abstract the space into a dimension suspended between representation and reality. Rather than focusing solely on a space's function, it aims to create environments that evoke specific feelings and reactions from the occupants. Importantly, FALA's interiors remain open to evolving interpretations of use, resisting fixed programmatic outcomes and enabling unplanned modes of domestic engagement. To achieve this, it often uses unconventional elements such as curved walls, unexpected spatial configurations, and vibrant materials. These design choices are intended to create a sense of wonder and engagement, making the space not just a backdrop for activities, but also an active participant in the users' experience.

Furthermore, FALA Atelier employs a thoughtful and deliberate outlook in the use of materials and colours. Often repeated in varied sets of symbols and geometric patterns across multiple designs, these elements create a familiar visual language in its interiors. Employing repetition creates a sense of continuity within its designs, where each material and colour choice intentionally contributes to an overall stylistic narrative of their spaces. Beyond aesthetics, these elements are also used to engage with the cultural and historical contexts of the site, ensuring the projects are not only visually striking but also deeply resonant with the meanings and narratives of their locale.

Finally, FALA's stylistic strategy can be defined as 'alter-modern', according to the definition proposed by the French critic Nicolas Bourriaud.[23] In *The Radicant*, Bourriaud proposes a conceptual alternative to postmodernism he calls alter-modernity.[24] This term emphasises translation and creolisation of cultural values to connect them to global networks. All FALA's founding partners have spent time abroad during their education, gaining diverse experiences in a sort of self-imposed exile from their original cultural identity. They accumulated meaningful content, which they brought back and integrated into their own reality upon returning home. Working on the periphery of megacities, their works represent a mediation between local and global influences, promoting an anachronistic form of spatial design that cultivates a new identity as something changeable over time and space. Their alter-modern design strategy aims to explore themes of abstraction as a departure from those of universalisation, realism, and a sameness apparent in current international

commercial design contexts. Consequently, both their completed works and, notably, their unfinished projects can be examined as embodying these principles. In particular, their unbuilt interiors emerge as speculative spaces where unplanned uses, temporal transformations, and occupant-led adaptations are deliberately anticipated as part of the design strategy.

oneiric domesticity

It is not a coincidence that FALA Atelier chose Henri Rousseau's 'The Dream' (1910) as inspiration to produce one of its most popular collages. 'The Dream' explores an oneiric dimension by depicting plants and animals that do not naturally coexist with each other. Blending real elements in imagined ways creates a fantastical environment that is more reminiscent of a dreamscape than a real place. FALA designed 'A very tiny palazzo' [Fig. 02], a compact forty-square-metre residence nestled in a small yet verdant garden in Porto and inserted the palazzo into Rousseau's oneiric imagery of exotic jungle, reclining female figure, and wild animals. This playful transposition also signals FALA's interest in crafting space settings that remain open to interpretative occupation and unforeseen spatial uses, qualities aligned with a conceptual open-design strategy.

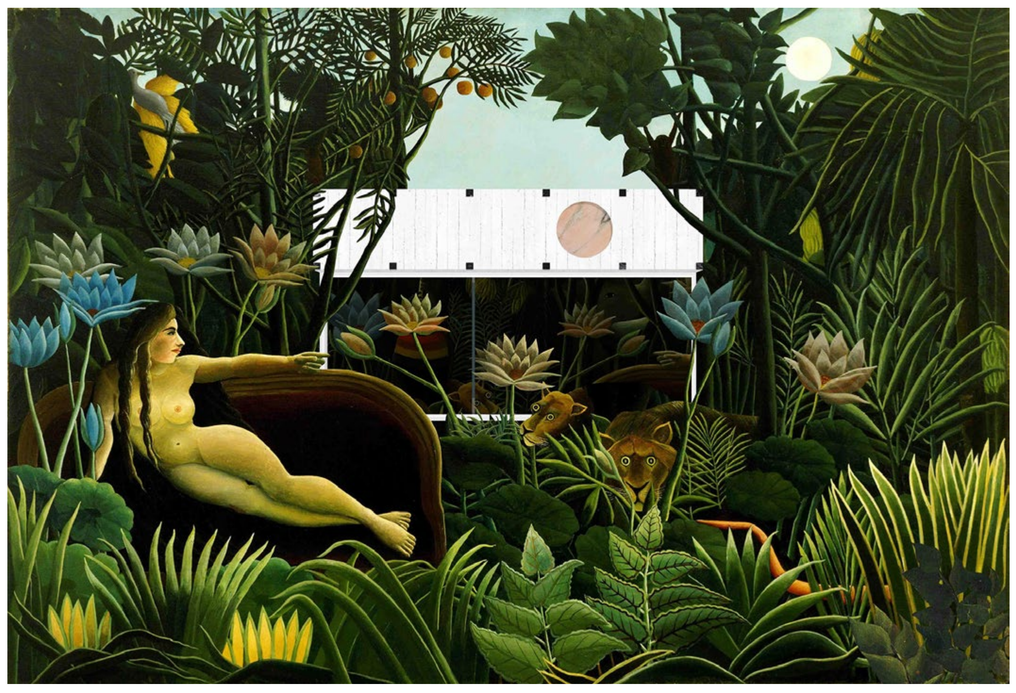


Figure 02.
FALA Atelier. *A very tiny palazzo*, 2022. Image courtesy of FALA Atelier.

According to the psychiatrist John Allan Hobson, dreams are a virtual representation of life that amalgamate fragments of reality in highly improbable ways.[25] In this sense, the term 'dreamscape' can be understood as a surreal environment evocative of the fragmented attributes of dreams. It represents a domain abundant with potential, unbound by the strictures of facts and logic. FALA Atelier's post-digital collages follow these qualities of dreamscapes in drawings by promoting the coexistence of historically distant events, the indefinite contours of shapes, the absence of shadows and gravity, as well as the exaggeration of proportions and competing narratives; such visual ambiguity invites occupants to imagine multiple modes of inhabitation, reinforcing an architectural stance that resists prescriptive spatial planning. Further, by avoiding the allure of hyper-realism in drawing, FALA's post-digital visual language creates a sense of architecture's capacity to change the character and atmospheric properties of a space by altering the props that populate it. This representational technique has been described, thanks to its directness, as 'both a technological movement towards "transparency" and, at the same time, a movement towards more powerful illusion.'[26]

In its built projects FALA Atelier often creates spaces that evoke a sense of whimsy, fluidity, and surrealism that generates curiosity and wonder. It has clearly declared this intent, for example, in the installation for the Unfolding Pavilion — Rituals of Solitude in the seventeenth Venice Architecture Biennale called 'Capsule with Fuzz.' In this project, FALA embodies an essence of dreamscapes within the built environment by incorporating elements that blur the boundaries between reality and imagination. These elements include the bold use of colour, unconventional geometries, and playful forms that challenge traditional, rectilinear configurations of architecture. FALA Atelier's works also provoke a sense of the uncanny by incorporating surreal elements such as floating structures, unexpected juxtapositions, and whimsical details. These elements disrupt the anticipated perception of space, to disorient

viewers. Further, the emphasis on immersive experience draws occupants into a narrative journey. FALA often introduces elements of ambiguity in its designs: spaces may serve multiple purposes, or their function may not be immediately apparent, encouraging users to engage with the environment in a more imaginative and interpretive manner. This deliberate functional ambiguity fosters unplanned patterns of use over time, positioning interiors as adaptable frameworks responsive to changing social needs.

For FALA, the desire to create dreamlike environments also becomes a pretext for proposing ideal social models. The fact that most of their projects have been clientless, because they have been promoted by investors or developed in competitions, fosters the idea of having an abstract inhabitant and provides more freedom to mitigate the negative consequences of apartment living.[27] These clientless contexts have allowed the practice to propose interiors that pre-emptively accommodate unknown users and emergent ways of living, further reinforcing the spatial logic of unplanned interiors. These solutions include designing buildings with integrated communal spaces, encouraging mixed-use developments that combine residential and social functions, and adopting architectural styles that promote visibility and interaction among residents.[28]

The issue of spatial distribution, particularly concerning the ambiguity of use designations, is central to FALA's exploration of new approaches to social interaction in interior spaces. By deliberately disrupting conventional planning hierarchies, FALA's interiors become experimental terrains for unprescribed occupation and user-driven spatial transformations. As introduced by Robin Evans in his seminal essay, 'Figures, Doors, and Passages', the evolution of connected rooms and the corridor plan in domestic interiors deeply impacted social interactions in households.[29] Interestingly, FALA Atelier's projects challenge the traditional distinction established by Evans by creating new, mixed, and ambiguous spatial organisations. As noted by Joanelly, 'This may be the reason why some of FALA's projects come across as topical declinations of the same program: the separation of auxiliary functions from the main space, the zoning of the plan.'[30]

Interestingly, FALA's explorations of social ideals in new, blurred distributions of conventional planning emulate the same oneiric qualities of its post-digital drawings. The sense of domestic conviviality, the quality of being friendly and lively that promotes new forms of community engagement in its designs, appears to be motivated by attempts to reshape domestic environments as places of social ideals. The dreamscape qualities of its drawings are further explored as real interior spaces by promoting intimate environments where people can express themselves. Reminiscent of Gaston Bachelard's concept of intimacy in the household, FALA's planning emphasises a deep emotional and imaginative connection between individuals and familiar environments in the home.[31] Like its post-digital representations, these spaces are not merely functional but instead invite the invocation of memories and emotions, providing an anchor for the creation of a dreamscape setting. At the same time, these interiors remain structurally and programmatically open-ended, anticipating unplanned forms of social engagement and occupation that evolve over time.

unbuilt dreamscapes: projects 172-42-191

Conceiving the profession of an architect as a continuous exercise in discovering the world — and as an ongoing form of self-improvement — FALA participates in competitions to explore new design possibilities. In these speculative contexts, architects have the opportunity to experiment with ideas and spatial strategies that might find limited space in private commissions. Notably, it is in these unbuilt competition projects, which remain on paper and outside the constraints of construction, that one can most clearly observe the themes that frame FALA's unique contribution to interior spatial design:

openness, narrative ambiguity, and unplanned modes of future use. These projects offer FALA the freedom to develop interiors that resist prescriptive planning and allow room for user-driven adaptation and emergent social configurations over time.

For this reason, and through dialogue with the architects, three projects were selected that epitomise how these themes are present within their work and how they have been developed within competition contexts. Conceived as moments of research, the three selected projects all pertain to the same residential typology: a multi-storey building where housing units are arranged pluralistically on the same floor and where several functions — such as vertical circulation, garden spaces, or the roof — are deliberately shared and open-ended. This condominium typology offers a fertile platform to reflect on issues of flexibility, collective habitation, and unplanned interior occupation. In fact, in the spatial organisation FALA proposes for each project, it is possible to find consistent distributive strategies that challenge conventional domestic arrangements and actively promote the creation of new and convivial social spaces with uses that remain indeterminate over time.

FALA does not name its projects with conventional titles but refers to them with numbers as if they were case studies. 172, for instance, is an unbuilt condo [Fig. 03]. The main idea underlying this project is the categorisation of space as parallel sequences of varying images. 172 exemplifies the idea of interior space as a flow, with partitional walls determining the direction of movement, views, and interactions. Rather than prescribing fixed room functions, the project leaves interior use open-ended, allowing for multiple, unplanned scenarios of domestic occupation. The only structural elements of the scene are punctual and highlighted as recognisable pivots; these spatial anchors suggest use possibilities without enforcing them, allowing inhabitants to define and redefine interior functions over time. Just as Kazuo Shinohara would leave a pillar prominently in the middle of a space to highlight and give it a distinctive quality, FALA does the same with a circular column that bisects the bedrooms, standing between the inhabitants and the outdoor space.[32]



Figure 03.
FALA Atelier. *Project n. 172*, 2020. Image courtesy of FALA Atelier.

The post-digital images represent the same space, focusing on a living area, with props changing subtly to animate the scenes. Displaying multiple possibilities of reality, these representations emphasise a light and oneiric sense of occupation. This visual strategy deliberately avoids closure, leaving interior life open to user interpretation and unplanned rearrangements. As Jesús Vassallo explains:

> Traditional physical collage techniques expose the disparity of the fragments being put together and thus call attention to the impossibility and precariousness of the ensemble. Because the union is impossible, traditional collage becomes a provocation, a disruption of the real. Digital collage, on the other hand, is often seamless, concealing its own traces and thus merging portions of the real into a plausible alternative.[33]



Figure 04.
FALA Atelier. *Project n. 46*, 2018. Image courtesy of FALA Atelier.

An evolution of this idea is apparent in project 46 [Fig. 04], another unbuilt residential competition project located at the city's periphery. Unlike 172, 46 explicitly stages the same interior space to accommodate different, overlapping functions, reinforcing the theme of unplanned and temporally shifting occupations. The various settings suggest a flexibility and again evoke the suggestion of dreamlike realism by compositional effects in the images. The characters are immobile like in a still-life painting, directly superimposed from David Hockney's work. Simple variations in the light, plaster walls, and artefacts create a diverse array of interior representations. Fixed compositional elements highlight a melody of variations that is repeated in the project's spatial planning. The structural pillars, clad in decorative materials, remain unaffected and connect each apartment to the overall architecture. Wet rooms, kitchens, and storage spaces are arranged around a central backbone, which also includes the building's vertical circulation. This arrangement allows for abundant natural light, and for flexibility in apartment layouts over time. Rooms can be opened to neighbours or common areas, or closed off by walls, curtains, or sliding panels: such adaptable partitions further support an interior environment that remains responsive to changing social needs and unanticipated forms of use.

A third project that demonstrates the clarity and consistency of FALA's work is 191 [Fig. 05]. The architectural expression boldly embraces both colour and texture. It is light and integrated and aspires to be a positive architectural addition to its immediate context. Yet, at its core, the project presents an interior environment intentionally open to future reinterpretation and unplanned patterns of occupation. Again, although each drawing adheres to similar compositional principles, the organisation of each is subtly varied, enhancing the spatial diversity within an illusory symmetry that amplifies inhabitants' diverse interactions with the space and the city. Like the two preceding projects, the interior planning of 191 reflects the same repetition and subtle variation of its interior spaces in these drawings. The design adheres to orthodox housing principles, but all traditional programmes can interchange positions, introducing new possibilities for interaction and social engagement for residents. This spatial looseness enables unforeseen domestic arrangements to emerge over time, further challenging fixed notions of residential programming. Bedrooms, or 'private spaces', revolve around the social areas, and all rooms have a permeable relationship with the exterior and the city with generous balconies and glazed panels.

The multitude of solutions for room populations in FALA's designs reflects the engaging manner of dreamscape ideas in drawings. With infinite possibilities for personalisation, this strategy in drawing and planning acknowledges the architect's intervention as limited and controlled up to a point, after which the construction becomes the client's domain. Such an approach explicitly anticipates the unpredictability of interior life, welcoming occupant-driven change, reconfiguration, and uses that cannot be predefined at the design stage. This acceptance of design limits celebrates freedom, allowing spaces to be freely inhabited and personalised. In the first project, the space was inhabited by a few objects that demonstrated their functions. In the second project, static figures illustrated different uses of the spaces. In this third project, FALA fully embraces the dreamlike dimension, no longer showing mere

situations but unfolding events, akin to narrative stories that animate the spaces. These narratives interweave as windows into the rooms, arranged in a matrix, and accompanied by texts, serve as captions that elucidate the various dreams. By embedding these micro-narratives into the design representation, FALA foregrounds the potential for diverse, unplanned domestic scenarios to unfold within the same architectural framework. Here are the stories:

Amélia, a forty-two-year-old primary school teacher, and João, a forty-one-year-old designer, live with their three-year-old cat Tobias. On Saturday mornings, Amélia and João hold drawing classes in the community space on the ground floor, while Tobias enjoys the tranquillity of the third-floor balcony.

Paulo, a thirty-eight-year-old lawyer, and Mariana, a thirty-five-year-old architect, live with their children: Tiago, seven, and Sofia, four. The household is peaceful when Sofia is not around. Tiago looks forward to summer Sunday lunches on the large balcony next to his mother's plants.

Beatriz (twenty), Catarina (nineteen), and Duarte (twenty-four) are contemporary dance students sharing a T2 apartment on the fifth floor. They have converted part of the living room into Duarte's bedroom. They rehearse on the balcony in summer, making their apartment a popular spot for classmates.

Sara, a fifty-six-year-old nurse, Pedro, a fifty-eight-year-old physiotherapist, and Manuel, an eighty-one-year-old retiree, live together with their ten-year-old cat Botas. Manuel moved in after breaking his leg. Sara created a small living room for Manuel to watch Benfica games, while Botas retreats to the opposite balcony to avoid noise.

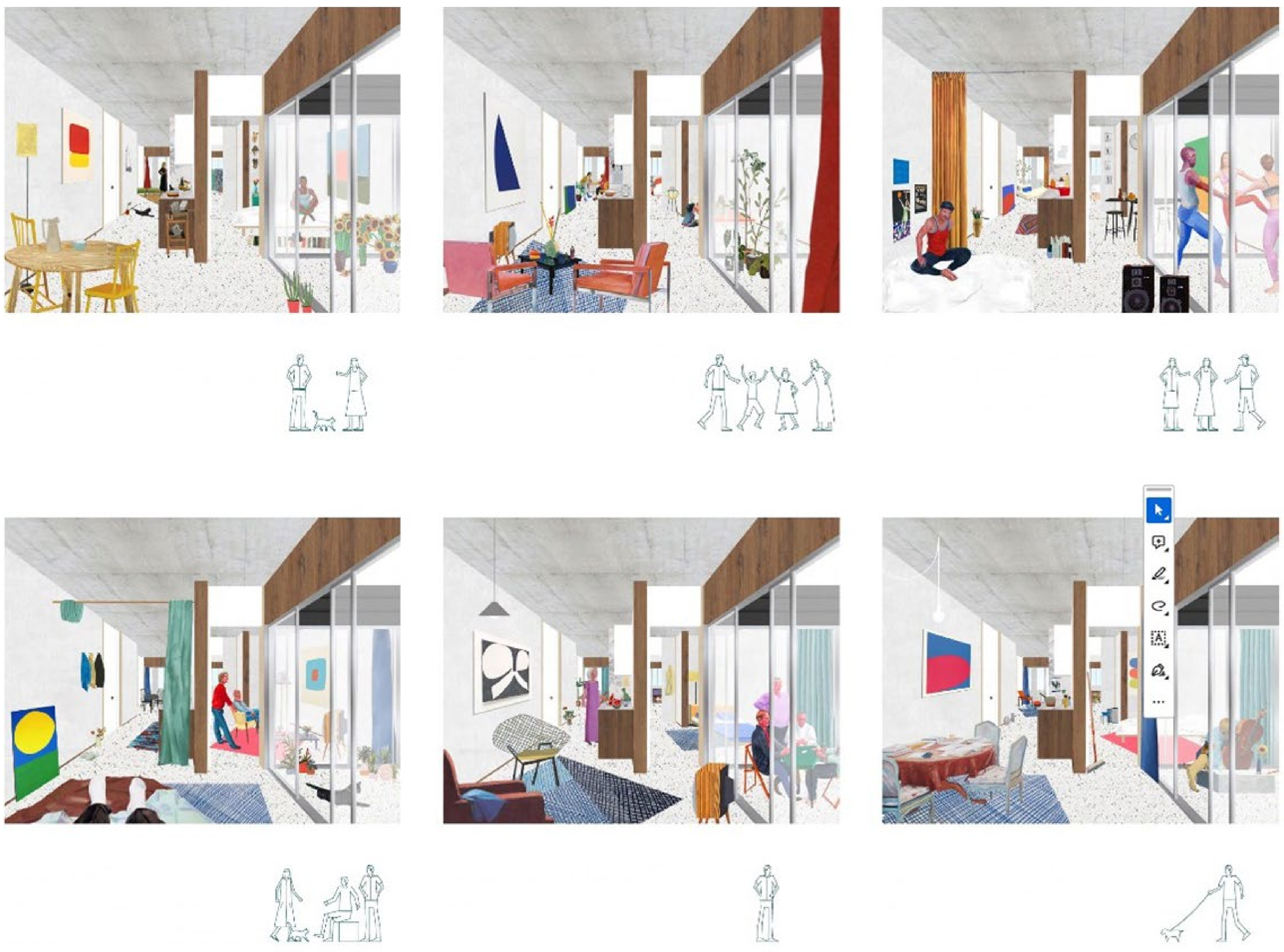


Figure 05.
FALA Atelier. *Project n. 191*, 2022. Image courtesy of FALA Atelier.

Bernardo, a sixty-three-year-old civil engineer, has lost interest in football since his wife's passing but is aware of games due to his neighbour's excitement. He spends Sundays playing sueca and discussing politics and economics with friends.

Miguel, a twenty-eight-year-old cellist, lives with his three-year-old dog Bolinhas. Miguel's disorganisation leaves sheet music scattered, but Bolinhas allows him to study peacefully only when he plays Bach, Bolinhas' favourite composer, adding life to Caminho da Fiteira.[34]

These stories, like FALA Atelier's post-digital drawings and spatial compositions, effectively reflect the studio's emphasis on flexibility, personalisation, and the creation of oneiric environments that blend function with imagination. Each scene, depicted through narrative, underscores how architectural spaces are not rigid, predetermined structures but rather fluid and transformative realms shaped by their inhabitants over time. FALA's drawings also highlight how architectural design can accommodate unplanned scenarios of use, adapting to shifting needs and occupant improvisation. This capacity for spatial indeterminacy reflects a deeper understanding of the lived realities, emotional dynamics, and evolving patterns of domestic life that emerge after architectural completion. While factors such as budget limitations, building regulations, and the diverse needs of larger communities may pose challenges in translating these imaginative concepts into fully functional, real-world environments, the unbuilt competition projects and their narrative-rich representations offer critical provocations for how interiors might evolve in ways unanticipated at the design stage. Their drawings contribute to contemporary architectural discourse by promoting a vision of adaptable, user-responsive, and socially emergent domestic interiors. They invite a reimagining of domestic space as not only utilitarian or aesthetically pleasing but also open-ended, emotionally resonant, and spatially prepared for unplanned futures, creating richer, more meaningful living experiences.

conclusion

FALA Atelier's work exemplifies a critically engaged and progressive approach within contemporary architectural discourse, positioning post-digital aesthetics not as an end in itself but as a tool for interrogating conventional modes of spatial production, representation, and occupation. By integrating traditional drawing techniques with digital technologies, FALA's visual language systematically challenges the dominance of hyper-realistic visualisation and questions the prevailing market-driven demand for highly polished, fixed images of interior space. This methodology is not merely a formal or stylistic choice; it operates as a conceptual critique of architectural determinism and the homogenisation of spatial experience in contemporary housing developments.

Central to FALA's design philosophy is a sustained engagement with spatial flexibility, temporality, and personalisation, which is particularly evident in its residential projects. The firm's interior configurations resist rigid functional zoning, favouring open-ended layouts that encourage multiple, coexisting forms of occupation and social interaction. Through this approach, FALA deliberately destabilises traditional domestic hierarchies, fostering conditions for emergent, unplanned uses of space. The ambiguity inherent in both its drawings and its spatial planning actively invites occupants to become co-authors in the shaping of interior environments over time, reflecting broader social and demographic shifts towards more fluid modes of dwelling.

Equally significant is FALA Atelier's strategic use of unbuilt competition projects as experimental platforms for spatial speculation. Unconstrained by client demands or regulatory frameworks, these speculative interiors explore alternative domestic futures, ones characterised by user-driven adaptation, social indeterminacy, and the capacity for spaces to accommodate unanticipated patterns of inhabitation. The firm's collage-based post-digital representations, rich in narrative layering and visual provocation, operate not only as communication

tools but also as theoretical constructs that embody architectural openness and the refusal of closure in interior planning. Its projects advocate for an architecture that embraces incompleteness, not as a limitation but as a productive condition for new social forms, emergent spatial behaviours, and a more ethical engagement with the evolving realities of domestic life.

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author biography

Andrea Crudeli. Architect and scholar. He holds a PhD in Architecture Design at the University of Pisa, where he teaches. He is currently a visiting research fellow at Chiba University, Japan. He has been a visiting scholar at the CCA of Montréal. Alongside scientific articles, he is author of the books *Massimo Carmassi 1974-1990. L'Ufficio Progetti e il suo archivio* and *Adaptive Reuse. Theoretical Glossary and Design Labs*. He has also been scientific director of international workshops, exhibition curator, and conference chair. He is a founding partner of the architecture and engineering firm Dedalo Building Lab, based in Firenze.

notes

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bhoot bangla: building stories and unplanning interiors in a bengali industrial town

Edward Hollis
University of Edinburgh
0000-0002-5160-6286

abstract

This essay explores the unplanning of interiors and the stories we tell about them. The interiors it examines occupy buildings that were originally planned under the British Raj for Asansol, a colonial/industrial town in West Bengal, India, but when empire and industry departed, the people who had been there all along moved into the vacuum left behind and became masters of the buildings they had served. With no formal titles to the properties and with eviction an ever-present possibility, they have, over decades, unplanned these interiors. Subdivided, repurposed, and ruined, their occupants unable to take full possession, unable ever to leave, these interiors have become *bhoot bangla*, which means, in Bengali, both ruined houses and haunted ones. Even their histories are ghostly and, in the absence of formal records, there are only stories to go on. How might we gather and evaluate those stories, and how can we — should we, given the precarious circumstances — retell them?

Drawing on structuralist understandings of story, and following the architectural theorist Sophia Psarra, this essay uses spatial thinking to construct 'building stories' that imagine, and thereby re-member, the buildings they story. At the same time, it explores how building stories can be themselves unplanned: on the one hand to reflect the (un)structures they story, on the other, to invite unpredictable adaptations, occupations, and hauntings of their own. It goes on to explore how these processes of unplanning can be generated and documented through practices of collaborative drawing, influenced by the work of illustrators such as the Glaswegian ethnographer Mitch Miller. The essay contributes new thinking to the practices of writing and drawing about architecture and place by considering how interiors, and the buildings they occupy, can be understood, and represented, as open, relational works.

keywords

drawing; creative writing; post-colonial; domestic; structuralism

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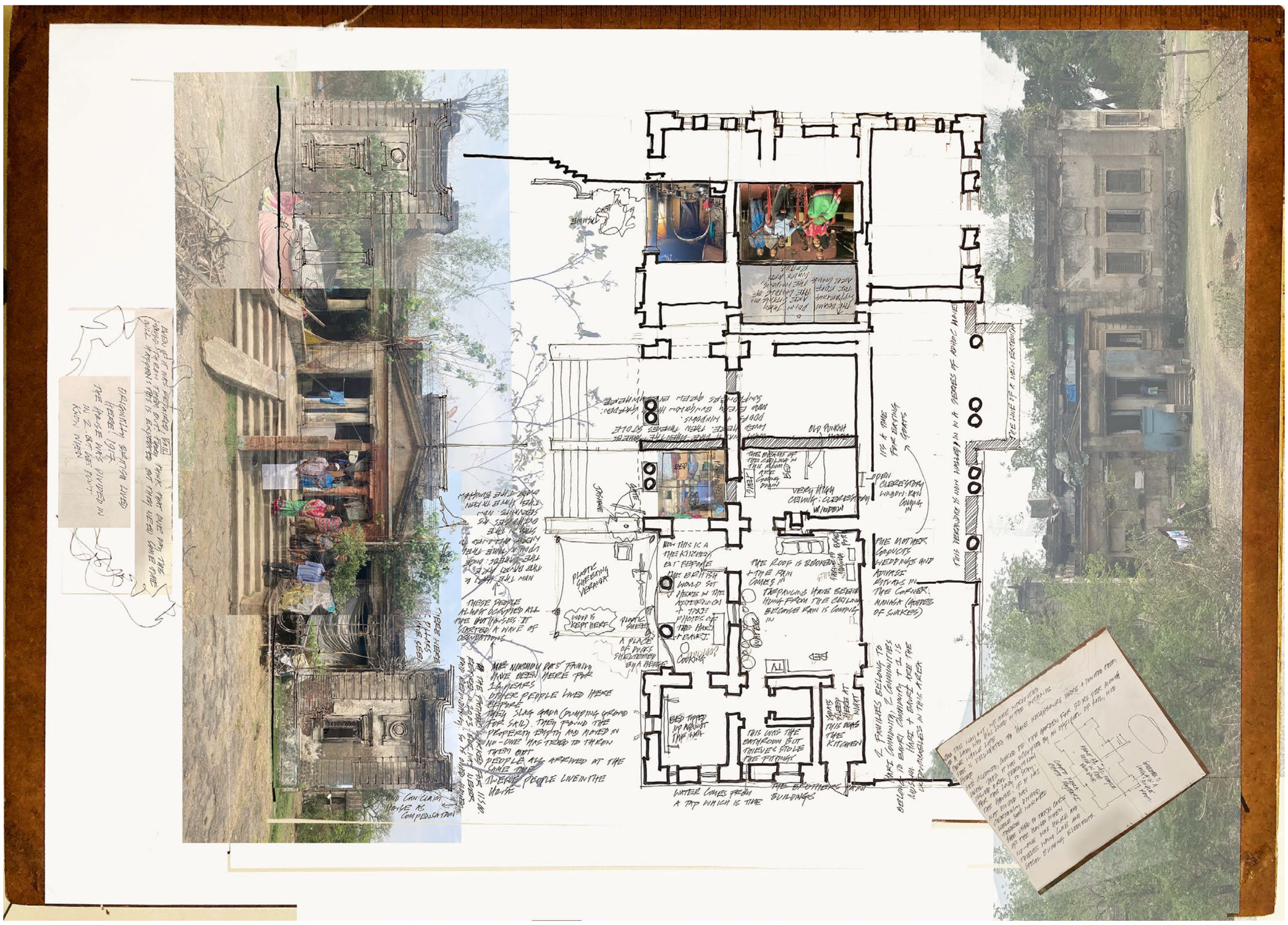


Figure 01.
Bhoot Bangla. Illustration: Edward Hollis, 2025.

first story: bhoot bangla

It's a *bhoot bangla*, they say, a haunted house, but it seems friendly enough: the family emerge to greet us at the top of the steps.

Through the trees, there's the golf course, the club, the Freemasons' Hall, and the big house: another pedimented, Palladian affair, presiding over the management zone of one of the oldest and largest steelworks in the country.

My guide they gesture in: he is one of them. I am not. Instead, as their teenage son watches, I measure out the exterior of their little palace. It is absurdly grand.

Eventually my guide appears: he's negotiated me in. And I realise that the little palace was, rather than is, absurdly grand.

Blocking the pedimented front door is a bed and, behind, it, a shelf stacked high with domestic detritus. Under the shelf there is a little hole — 'for the chickens in the night' they say.[1] On the floor of the verandah a kettle brews over a smouldering stove. The sheeting swathed around the columns is there, I realise, to protect the flame from wind and rain.

Within, it is pitch black. 'The old kitchen', they say, showing me a room stacked high with firewood. 'We keep the goats here at night.' In what must once have been the dining room, they take their places on plastic chairs. In the west, a gigantic bed. In the

south, the television. In the northeast, a shrine set about with brass pots:

'Musuma' the mother tells me. 'Snake. Goddess.'

'Your home?' I ask, 'Temple! Palace!' and they point wearily up at the black plastic sheeting. 'The rain comes in,' they say. 'There's no point in replacing the windows. Not if you don't know…'

It is only as we are leaving that the old woman appears, from a cottage in the corner of the garden.

'She'll tell you,' they say. 'She knows.'

'Once Upon a Time,' she says, in Bengali, 'I worked in the house.' She did the lowliest jobs, weeding the garden, sweeping floors, and cleaning the toilets.

But, one day, the master of the house announced that he was leaving. That everyone was leaving: the steel plant was leaving, shutting down, moving on. Modernising.

'You stay here,' he told her, 'and look after the place while I'm away.'

And every day she went to the house, and swept the floors and weeded the garden and cleaned the toilets. She went every day. But the master didn't come back.

In fact, as the months went by, the other masters and then rest of the workers started to leave too, and after a year or so, the only people that were left were people like her. They went on cleaning and gardening and cleaning the toilets, even though there was no one to do it for.

And then they began to realise they were, or weren't, on their own. At night, from her cottage, she'd hear noises — smashing glass, cracking timber, as if there were ghosts there. In the morning she'd find holes where there should have been windows and doors, and bathtubs and toilets prised from their housings.

'I should challenge them,' she thought, as she lay in her bed.

But she didn't dare, and after some time, the dacoits didn't even bother to wait for the darkness, and then she was really afraid. What would the officer say if he could see the place now? Who would protect her then?

And so she sent a message to the village down the road — Slag Para, it was called, the old slag heap on the edge of the old steel plant — and asked its people to come and join in the master's home.

They divided the little palace between them, and made places in the drawing rooms and colonnades for their fires and their goats and their chickens, their snake goddesses and their bicycles.

They made themselves at home, but only just. They still think the master will come back some day and that then he'll throw them out, either for having squatted in his home, or for having failed to defend it.

Until then, whenever then might be, they haunt the *bhoot bangla*: never truly living there, never leaving.

Before we leave, I ask everyone to gather on the steps for a photograph. It's hard, on the crumbling masonry, to find somewhere to stand, and no one smiles.

context one: building stories

Bhoot Bangla is a 'building story.' Composed through a process of redrafting the field notes written all over the drawing of the site that accompanied it, it narrates an interior that once upon a time was planned as part of a colonial-industrial machine and has since been unplanned, both through its precarious occupation and as a result of the shifting political and economic contexts that have produced that precarity.

The story of building three such building stories is told below. It examines storying and building as the plotting and planning of space and time: the production of what the 1930s Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin has called chronotopes: structures in literary

fiction which bring together time (*chronos*) and space (*topos*).[2] And it proceeds to examine how such chronotopes are, and can be, unplanned through the practice of building stories in three ways.

First, by building stories 'about' unplanned interiors, like the *bhoot bangla*, the sweet shop in the second story, and the village square in the third. All three are situated in Asansol, a place that is, itself, in the process of constant unplanning: an industrial town in West Bengal in India founded in the nineteenth century, in which the progress of colonial and post-colonial empire and industry have for two centuries repeatedly built and rebuilt, planned and unplanned their landscapes, buildings, and interiors.

Second, by demonstrating how the story of the research as also being 'about' the building of these stories. Their process of construction is narrated through three sections: one about the first encounter with the town; the second about initial collaborative efforts to narrate it; and the third about my own contribution to that collaborative effort through the media of drawing and writing.

And third, by situating these efforts within the frames of critical thinking about building and storytelling. Focusing first on the planning of stories through the construction of chronotopes, and secondly on their unplanning and their nature as open or relational work, focusing on the example of the folk tale and its retelling.

Both Buildings and Stories are planned and unplanned, designed or authored, built or published, occupied or told, and re-occupied or retold. Because of this, creative possibilities are presented by exploring the tension between these processes of ordering and disordering through the furnishing of each 'building story' through texts and drawings.

How can one reflect upon a medium through itself? Carl Klaus, the founder of the nonfiction writing programme at Iowa State University explains how segments of what he calls 'segmented texts':

> can be read both as isolated units and as reverberating links to other segments; it is a 'strange reading experience, unlike that produced by any other type of prose' which produced in him 'an irresolvable tensions between two different ways of reading and responding.' [...] [which] forces him to intuitively make connections or distinctions between and among the segments. [...] these 'associative leaps' may replicate the fragmentary nature of 'recollection and reflection', but they all suggest a willingness to accept unresolved or undefined associations.[3]

As such, the following analysis 'segments' together three different registers of text: three building stories, three 'protocols' — accounts of the building of these stories, and three critical contexts within which that building has been practised. These registers are interspersed to engage with three broad themes: first, the analogy between buildings and stories; second, the analogy between plotting and planning; and third, the framing of strategies for unplanning (and by analogy, unplotting) stories, buildings, and interiors.

First: the terms 'building' and 'story.'

building

Building is a vague word. The '-ing' implies a Teutonic origin: a material practice, rather than a classical concept like 'architecture.' The -ing also implies that 'building' is the participle of a verb: a doing, and an ongo-ing do-ing at that.

One may never know whether a building is finished. A building may be indeterminate or contingent. Buildings might be in the continuous or repeated process of un- or re-building. A building can run to ruin, inviting speculation as the human geographer Tim Edensor argues, 'about how the world might be differently ordered in accordance with looser aesthetics, less managed spaces, bodies and things, and multiple interpretable signs.'[4]

No part of a building affords this affordance more than its interiors: repeatedly refurnished and redecorated, repurposed, rearranged; pushing against, eating holes in, multiplying, subverting, the bricks and mortar that supposedly order them: unplanning the plan.

story

Story shares two syllables and a common root with the word 'history'. Both refer to the narrative relation of events, but story is a more vague and subversive term.

Writing in the 1930s *On the Art of Storytelling*, the cultural theorist Walter Benjamin comments:

> Storytelling [...] does not aim to transmit the pure, intrinsic nature of the thing like information or a report. It plunges the thing into the life of the teller and draws it out again [...] Storytellers tend to begin a story with a depiction of the circumstances in which they first heard it, when they don't pass it off simply as their own experience.[5]

There is no definitive, final, or original telling of a story. There are only tellings, each of which unplans the original narrative just as surely as the endless rearrangements and re-occupations of interiors unplan the buildings they occupy. Bhoot Bangla, for example, is one such retelling of a retelling: not just a story about a building, but a story about its reoccupation. Not just that, but also a story about a visit to that reoccupied building, in which the story of reoccupation itself, as a form of building, is retold.

protocol one: an unplanned town

This research started in 2018 and remains unfinished. It is the engine and outcome of a collaboration with a small voluntary organisation: the Asansol Heritage Research Group (AHRG).

When they first email me in 2017, they have, they say, work for me. They've heard I am from Scotland, and they want me to go the National Library to find out what I can about the foundation of their town, which was planned in the nineteenth century by Scottish colonial engineers. They can't get the information themselves, they tell me, so they have no idea what the plan was. There are, in their town, no libraries or museums or accessible archives. Any records there are, they tell me, are probably in Scotland. Their old colonial planned town is passing away, they tell me: the consequence of migration, industrial churn, toxic air pollution, byzantine property law.

And so, before it disappears, they ask me to join them, Brothers Grimm-like, in the mapping, mining, and building of oral and popular stories that might record their past, draw attention to its plight in the present, and, in doing so, help build for it a future. That process will involve writing together, designing and building a museum, and making drawings to exhibit in it: activities designed to collect, articulate, and share Asansol's building stories, and encourage others in the town to go out to find, build, and tell more.

In 2019, I travel to Asansol. The AHRG keep me to a packed schedule. Our visits are chronologically organised, they tell me, to take us from Antiquity on Monday to Independence on Saturday.

But, most of the time, it transpires, we are taking tea with the chief railway engineer and lunch in the Freemasons' Hall. We sip whisky on the roof of the Rajah's palace and I give an impromptu talk to the Rotary Club. I pose for photographs and shake hands. I become dimly aware that I am an object on display.

I wonder if I, the ostensible audience of these performances, am an obstacle to our project of finding and telling stories. But, apparently, I have my uses. I carry, without realising it, messages from the Freemasons to the Railway about who owns the Masonic Hall, from the queen mother to the crown prince about the future of the palace, from the miners to the coal board about the preservation of the village temple. This has, at times, an uncomfortable neo-colonial twist. Obtaining a meeting with the coal board, for example, is impossible for my local collaborators until I produce letters of introduction on my (British) university

headed paper, even though I, the stranger, am the one who needs the introduction.

I soon learn — we soon learn — that we aren't abstracted observers of the stories of Asansol, but part of their telling. My role is, I realise, to be a visible audience, an outsider, without whom they could not be elicited, or be worth telling.

Our visits never run to plan — we are always stuck in traffic, making frantic WhatsApp calls. We turn up at the royal palace as heritage enthusiasts, but are welcomed, we discover to our dismay, as potential purchasers. A politician hijacks a talk at the local college. I keep dawdling over things my hosts want to hurry me past. I want to see the mosque, and the hut on the edge of the temple grounds where the tribal people go to perform their secret rites. I try to climb into the mine. I'm attracted to a neoclassical verandah, blackened with cooking fires and repaired with black plastic sheeting. These distractions disrupt the plan, the narrative frame of the visit, giving voice to minor characters in the 'official' story, shining a spotlight on props that were intended to be part of the background scenery, and interrupting or diverting the plot midstream.

second story: the battle of the bakery

We are late: our drive into town is interrupted by a protest in the bazaar: 'Chol! Chol! Chol!' the crowd chants: 'Rise Up! Get up! Get on with it!'[6]

There's no time. The contract could be signed any day. The shopkeepers could be moving out in

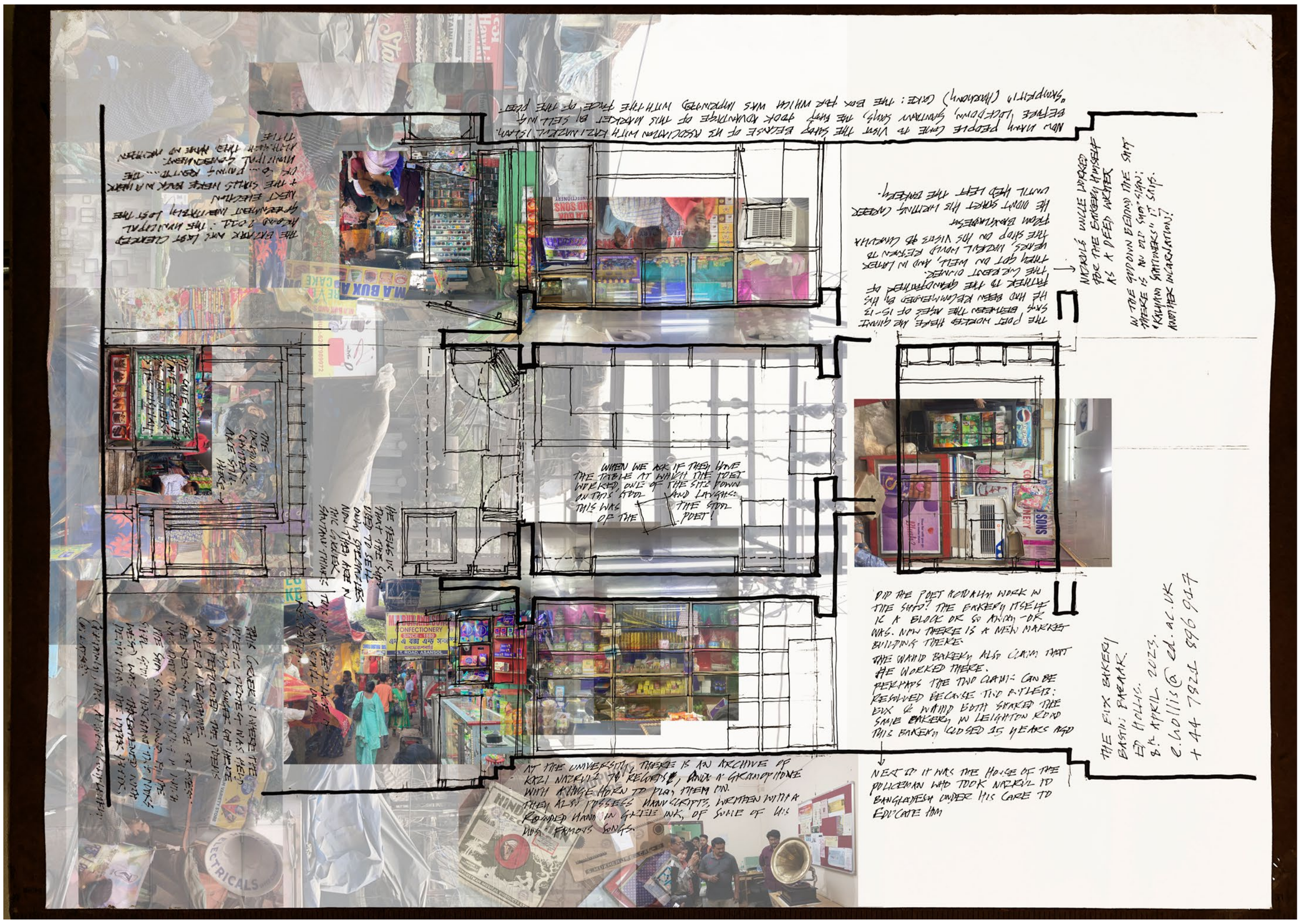


Figure 02.
The Battle of the Bakery. Illustration: Edward Hollis, 2025.

weeks, and the workmen are here to start taking the building down within hours.

Time is of the essence. This is the bazaar, after all, where crows and dogs and cows and people surge in daily tides; in which, every morning, battered cabinets open, revealing mirrored interiors, watches, jewels, sweets, gold, attars, phones; in which, every evening, women scour the dust for the tiny crumbs of gold the dealers have forgotten and the cats the mud beneath the fish stalls for heads, eyes, blood.

In which shops are strung together from no more than plastic sheeting and broken furniture, just in case the municipality decide to declare them illegal and tear them down. Just like they did five years ago. And ten.

We are here to save one of them as a monument. It's hard to imagine it could be one. Every internal surface of a shop of around 2 by 4 yards is covered by glass-fronted, plywood shelving units, lined with shiny wrapping paper, stuffed with packets of biscuits and conical party hats.

But the signs declare that Messrs Bux and sons have been here since 1880. People come all the way from Bangladesh to see this shop, the current Mr Bux says: 'Kazi Nazrul Islam was only a teenager when he came to work here,' they tell me. 'He did the accounts.'

'It was only later, after he left, and joined the army, and went to prison, that he became the Rebel Poet, the Voice of Bengal, who roused the people to rebellion with his cry: "Chol! Chol! Chol!" It was only much later, that he became the national poet of Bangladesh.'

'But he used to come back here, even then, to see the place of his birth. And people still come all the way here to see where he began.'

'That's what we are trying to preserve.'

Outside, the singing continues:

'Chol! Chol! Chol!'[7] they chant. 'Get on with it!'

'What do you show them?' I ask, and the shopkeeper laughs and points at the stool I'm sitting on.

'We tell them that he used to use it.'

'Did he?'

He laughs, but he doesn't reply: there's no time

context two: planning and building stories

On the one hand, the practice of Building Stories tells stories about buildings, like the ones you have just read about the Bhoot Bangla and the Sweet shop. On the other, it concerns the building of those stories: the distinctive ways in which their structure and form engage with their content.

How are stories planned and built?

The nineteenth-century dramaturge Gustav Freytag quotes Aristotle in saying, 'the action is the first and most important thing, the characters only second', and proceeds to prescribe how the action of any drama will, or must, follow:

> if one may symbolise its arrangement by lines — a pyramidal structure. It rises from the introduction with the entrance of the existing forces to the climax, and falls from here to the catastrophe. Between these parts lie (the parts of) the rise and fall.[8]

Freytag proposes that 'storyness' is defined by structure — but what is being structured?

Not just the action or the details of the plot, but the very media in which it unfolds: space and time. As Bakhtin wrote:

> In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes

> artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history.[9]

The term 'chronotope' (which means, literally in Greek 'time-place') draws together time and space. In the same way, Freytag's pyramid makes a spatial analogy, a diagram of 'rising' and falling action, even though there is nothing objectively 'rising' about running away, or 'falling' about coming home again. The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur called 'architecture the configuration of space and narrative the configuration of time' but the idea of the chronotope suggests a synthesis between these terms of space, time, architecture and narrative.[10]

This synthesis has also been developed by architectural theorist Giovanni Corbellini, who writes of 'plot' as a word:

> whose meanings propose various overlaps between literature and architecture, narrative and design. It defines a piece of land, a sense strictly tied to its etymological origin) as well as the course of a story, the act of tracing a drawing and the planning of intrigues.[11]

Sophia Psarra's *Architecture and Narrative* analyses of both real buildings (the Barcelona pavilion, for example) and fictional ones (Jorge Luis Borges' Library) discovers how their spatial form relates to their narrative meaning. 'Architecture does not only express meaning,' she writes, 'it also participates in the construction of meaning through the ordering of spaces and social relationships. Architects respond to this ordering by orchestrating relations.'[12]

That is, both writers and architects plan to generate worlds, rather than merely representing them. For example, the two building stories presented so far attempt to construct a distinctive chronotopes: uncertain and precarious places and times. The expectations of grandeur presented by façade of the *Bhoot Bangla* are disappointed by its interiors; within, gnomic, unexplained explanations are essayed and misunderstood, and the author is never quite sure whether they are welcome. In the sweet shop, there's no time, or so many layered times that that time has ravelled into a knotted ball: we are late; the crowd shout 'Chol!'; there's no time for the shopkeeper to explain; and the story is told in abrupt single lines of text. In both stories, fragmented paragraphs and unfinished sentences undermine any expectations of classical coherence, to either buildings, interiors, or stories.

The practice of building stories explores the reciprocity between building and stories through the activity of planning and building worlds in this way — and, as we shall see, unplanning them too.

protocol two: planning writing

Our first experiment in planning and building stories together involves co-authoring a chapter for an academic book.

My collaborators contribute three stories about the town. My role, I discover, is to provide the framing narrative, relating these stories to the theme of the book itself. This soon becomes an uncomfortable position. Despite my best intentions, I find myself acting as the neo-colonial interlocutor, who frames 'raw' data for academic consumption. Once we have each written our contributions I suggest we share our comments on them. I plunge in, but they say nothing about my text, despite my clumsy interventions into theirs. And so, despite my best intentions, I end up being the editor, and they the objects of my edit. And then, in an even more uncomfortable twist, so do our editors, who, ironically, ask us to write more post-colonial theory (largely written, of course, by Western academics) into the text.

The power relations will be evident, and they problematise this sort of writing: who (and therefore what) is this writing actually for?

In interview my collaborators are pragmatic. They tell me they believe that it gives them access to an

otherwise inaccessible global audience. But I'm not so sure this sort of retelling is going to help build, or rebuild, the story of their town.

planning stories

At least as we go through this dry exercise we tell one another stories. These take various forms: factual expositions, meditations, vignettes of town life, retellings of myths, WhatsApp messages, pictures.

We are not sure about what to do with them. What structure or form might we use to unlock the collective power of these collected stories?

I invite my friends to write down, on separate pieces of paper, the stories they most want to tell. As if we were playing patience, we deal these 'cards': sorting out duplications, coincidences, hierarchies, and patterns. I turn our game into a spreadsheet, whose columns represent themes of enquiry, while each cell represents a story. The AHRG respond with a diagram they call a mandala, which configures the topics as a hexagon, dividing our stories into three categories: industry, Hindu/tribal people, and 'others' (Christians, Jains/Buddhists, Muslims, and secular government).

But our diagrams do not, for the moment, generate anything more than themselves — a sort of cataloguing system. Another dimension is required to bring them to life.

(un)planning a museum

The addition of the third and fourth dimensions helps us to bind together the stories of The Unfinished Biography. In the late summer of 2020, Kazi Nazrul, the local university, offers the AHRG a space for a permanent exhibition about the heritage of Asansol: a museum. There has never been anything it in like Asansol before and the AHRG don't know what to do.

We start by trying to organise — to plan — the sequence of the stories we want to tell. The AHRG produce a series of interior elevations for their museum that tell the story in four thematic and chronological chapters, one per wall: the forests of precolonial Asansol; the colonial town; the bazaar during the independence struggle; and a wall depicting the present town. I respond with a perspective sketch, spatialising the story in four dimensions as an interior that leads, anti-clockwise, from the ancient past to the future (of the past) of the town. The floor is covered with a map and, upon it, a table, furnished with diverse artefacts, makes space for discussion. One wall is kept empty for the future.

And then one day the AHRG send me a very different idea. There will be, they tell me, twenty-one pictures hung on the wall. There will be a table down the middle, upon which objects will be displayed. Juxtaposed, without explanation, on the table: a lump of coal, a brick, made by the East Indian Railway Company, and a Bengali edition of the *Ramayana*. And each image on the wall is similarly constructed: diverse images, texts, photographs, assembled apparently at random.

At first there are no captions, until the university insist. The AHRG provide twenty-one quotations from W.B. Yeats, each seemingly randomly allocated to one of the collaged images. This is no error, or omission. The AHRG explain:

> those lines seem to be very general [...] which can be interesting, but a kind of context is provided to those lines when they are placed over the specific frames [...] that gives meaning to the quotes only, [and] on the other hand, the frames.[13]

They have constructed this museum, this spatialised story, not as an encyclopaedic, scientific structure of explanation, but a seemingly arbitrary collage, whose incompleteness, they say:

> conjures different stories from different angles, which are all interrelated [...] so it is very difficult to just tell one story at a time because all of the stories are related to all other stories and they are all entangled.[14]

Setubandha, they call it: The Bridge, and it soon becomes apparent why.

As the builders are hanging the pictures on the walls and the cleaners are mopping the floor, they start to talk. They recognise places in the images, and some of the objects on the table. Encountering no explicit explanations as to their meaning, the workmen and the university staff, and then, on the opening day, the visitors, begin to speculate, to tell one another stories about what they see. They do not agree on its import, for each person makes different connections between the things they encounter. And since this collection of fragments appears to be unfinished, they offer new stories and objects to complete it. The woman who runs the canteen, for example, offers to bring in other objects from her family temple to place in the museum.

The AHRG say the museum:

> is creating a space for them where they can have some listeners [...] everyone wants to tell his or her own story. Most of the time we don't have listeners, who will listen attentively carefully or listen attentively about their past experience about their grandfathers about their places.[15]

Setubandha, a space of incomplete knowledge, becomes not a repository, or a treasury, or even just an exhibition of stories, but the matrix of their re-production: an invitation to build bridges.

third story: brothers retell tales

I sit on a plinth in the square of the village by the mine. The brothers of the village gather round. They have heard about Setubandha, and they want to see what we can do for them.

I start to draw.

There are two temples in the square, both dedicated to Astanayika, they tell me, an avatar of Durga. She is present here in eight avatars. All of them are also Durga. Durga is one avatar of the Goddess.

But if there are eight goddesses, or one, or both, then why are there two temples? I ask.

And the brothers tell me the story of Jagath Ram Roy and his brothers.[16]

'Once upon a time, Jagathram Rai was called by the king to the court of Kashipur.'

'No,' interjects a brother. 'It was the queen who called for him — the king was sick, remember?'

'Ah yes, the king was sick. And so Jagatram stayed with the king, and fasted for many months, until the king was well again.'

'I thought he'd just been down to the river for a bath.'

'That's just what the headman thinks.'

'And he wouldn't know anything.'

'Anyway, back home, here, it was puja time: the astrologer decreed it' — the current astrologer rolls his eyes and laughs — 'and so the guardians of the temple started the ceremonies.'

'And it was just then, of course, that their brother Jagat Ram, the oldest, the holiest of them all, walked back in.'

'He was furious,' says another brother.

'No,' another corrects him. 'Juggut Rum could never, would never be furious. But he was disappointed. And so either out of embarrassment himself, or to embarrass his brothers, he built his own temple right next door. It's almost exactly the same as the original, as you can see.'

'And who was this Jagathram Roy?' I ask. 'Why did the king ask for him?'

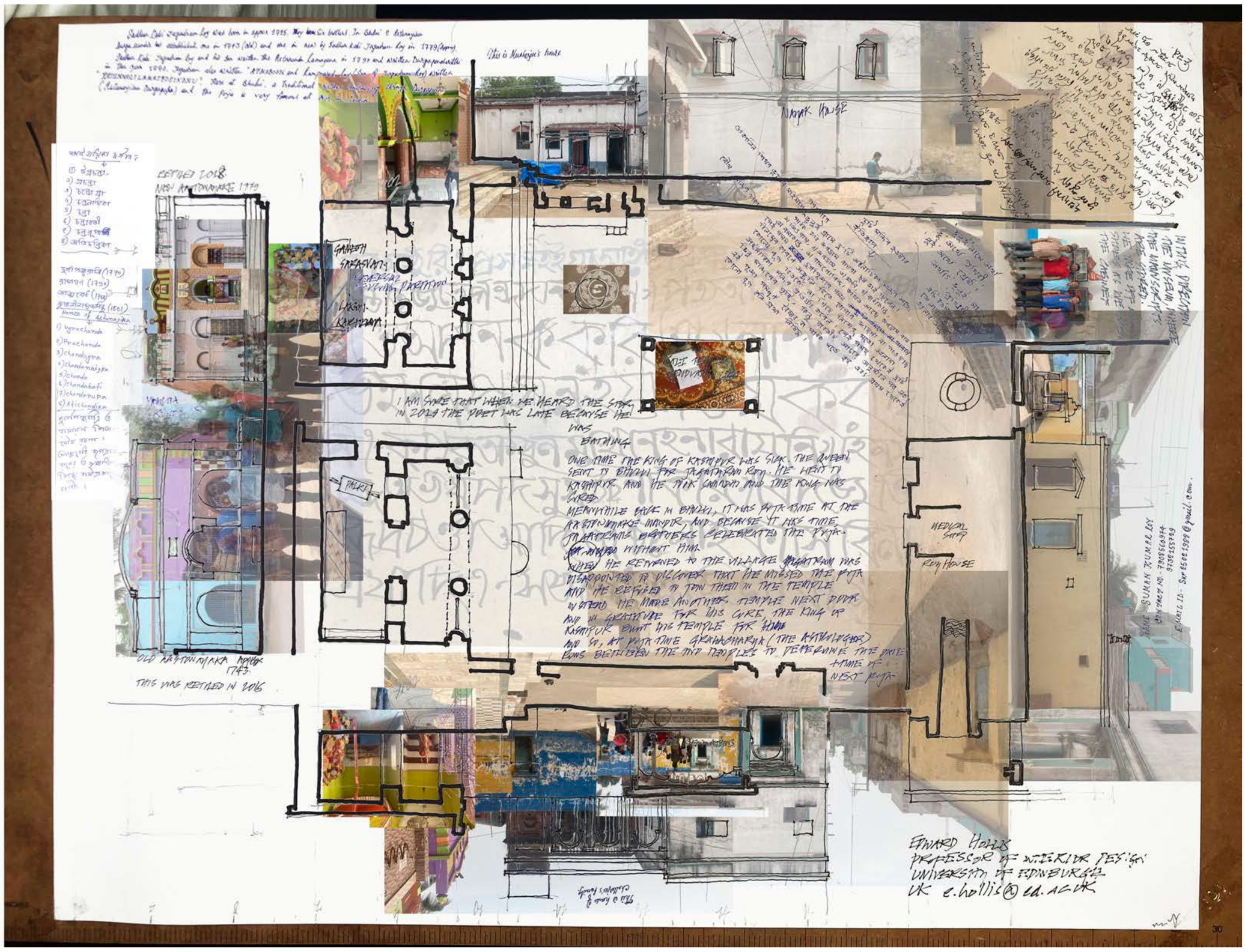


Figure 03.
Brothers tell tales. Illustration: Edward Hollis, 2025.

They look surprised.

'He was the poet, the author of the *Ramayana*, of course.'

It's not what I'd learned about the ancient epic.

'Our *Ramayana*,' explains one brother. 'He made Valmiki's epic ours: the trees and the sweets, the monkeys and mountains are our trees and sweets and monkeys and mountains. In his poem, Ayodhya is here. Rama and Sita are here. The gods are here.'

'And he wrote it in our language,' continues another. 'We'll show you,' they say. 'We have a museum of our own, you see,' and they lead off a procession through the village.

Inside a concrete outhouse, we remove our shoes and approach a cabinet, from which the brothers remove parcels of folded newspapers, and unwrap sheafs of delicate, roughly-made paper. Upon them, written two and a half centuries ago in a large cursive Bengali hand, is the *Ramayana* of Jagathram Roy.

'We don't have it all here,' they whisper. 'Only fragments. Some of his descendants in the village won't give up the pages they inherited.'

'But we know it by heart, and every year, we sit in

his temple — the copy — and repeat it, word for word, as best we can.'

'Of course,' interjects one, 'we don't get it all right.'

And we stroll back down the lane to the two temples.

'We've restored them recently.'

So I see. In lurid, fierce, bubblegum pinks, purple, burgundy, orange mint green, and chrome yellow, glazed tiles and pink ironwork, good enough to eat.

'In keeping with tradition.'

It's not what I'd learned about tradition. But I don't think that's what they mean.

They gesture proudly at their temples, each one an imperfect avatar, a retelling of itself, each one a retelling of the other, both temples to eight avatars of an avatar of an avatar of their ancestor, who, once upon a time, made them, however imperfectly, his own retellings.

unplanning building stories

Sophia Psarra, Corbellini, and Ricoeur write of plans and plots, architecture and narrative, space and time. But this research is about building and stories, which, like the stories of the *Ramayana*, or Jagathram Roy, or his village, are always in the process of unplanning, their form and meaning uncertain and unfinished.

In *Reading Architecture*, Adam Sharr writes that while the stories that buildings tell can be read, they are not authored text: 'the presence of built fabric is too material for that analogy to stretch meaningfully' and he warns that we need to read them on their own, bricks-and mortar terms: 'the architect-authors of buildings, and critics awed by authorship, seldom offer the most reliable accounts of them.'[17]

After all, Sharr continues, 'Buildings have multiple authors. The role of inhabitants in configuring and reconfiguring spaces is just as valid as the role of any professional.'[18]

What stories might multiply authored bricks and mortar tell and generate? What happens if we unplan, as well as plan, building stories?

In *Opera Aperta* — the Open Work — the Italian cultural theorist Umberto Eco argues that 'works' (of art, music, or literature) are traditionally understood as artefacts: singular objects, authored to express specific intentions.[19] Their form transmits these intentions to the audience. But the author of an open work has chosen to leave some things open to others to decide. In the case of a Calder mobile, he writes, this may be a breath of air that rearranges the parts. In the case of a piece of music by Pierre Boulez, this may involve leaving much more of the score open to the performer (the length, or order of notes in the melody, for example) than is customary in classical performance practice, and performer and audience are engaged in creating the work. 'Every performance explains the composition but does not exhaust it,' writes Eco.[20]

The French art critic Bourriaud's conception of 'relational aesthetics' extends the possibilities of the open work. For all its call to openness, Eco's open work is still understood as a 'work' — a score, a sculpture, an artefact created by an author, which might outlive any particular situation. Bourriaud's exploration of contemporary art practice, however, poses the artefact itself as something ephemeral:

> Unlike an object that is closed in on itself by its signature or style, present-day art shows that form only exists in the encounter and in the dynamic relationship enjoyed by an artistic proposition with other formations.[21]

Bourriaud writes of the implications of these 'presentations of possibilities':

> it is no longer possible to regard the

> contemporary work as a space to be walked through [...] It is henceforth presented as a period of time to be lived through, like an opening to unlimited discussion.[22]

Open and relational conceptions of the 'work' (in this instance, let us say, a story) iterate Bakhtin's idea of the chronotope, suggesting that, in one work, there might be several chronotopes layered upon one another. Firstly, there is the chronotope internal to the work itself: the time and space generated by its own internal form and structure; but there is also a second chronotope at play: the time and space created by the story of the repeated (but shifting and distinctive) tellings or performances (unplannings) of the work over time: the story of the story, as it were.

retelling, and telling for retelling

This is an insight that has long been understood in the field of folklore studies, which engages not just with folk tales as 'works' with their own internal plots, plans, logics, and chronotopes, but also with the narration of their transmission. Marina Warner's *From the Beast to the Blonde*, for example, tells stories about stories — the evolution of Mother Goose, or Beauty and the Beast, over centuries: stories that take on their own temporal and spatial — that is, chronotopic — logic.[23]

In the 1920s the English social psychologist F.C. Bartlett made an experiment to explore how stories of this sort might unplan themselves over time. He would tell his students a native American folk tale, *The War of the Ghosts*, and would ask them to re-tell it later.[24] Bartlett noted that no one was able to repeat the story perfectly, and that their retellings deteriorated in accuracy over time. That was to be expected, but what he also observed was that the parts of the story the students changed most often, and most dramatically, were those parts they did not understand: those that involved ghosts, or magic, which, in their tellings, the (twentieth century, social science) students kept trying to 'explain away.'[25]

Bartlett concluded that lapses in memory, changes in the story, occur as we attempt to fit the diverse and unpredictable phenomena of other cultures into our own schemae, to make them comprehensible to new audiences — be they ourselves, or others.

The observation has also been taken up by cultural historians. For example, Robert Darnton writes of the actual conditions of retelling, citing how Dalmatian storytellers remember their oral tellings of *The Iliad*:

> These 'singers of tales' do not possess the fabulous powers of memorization sometimes attributed to 'primitive' peoples [...] Instead, they combine stock phrases, formulas, and narrative segments in patterns improvised according to the response of their audience. [...] [the storyteller] does not conceive of repetition in the same way as a literate person [...] Texts are not rigidly fixed for him as they are for readers of the printed page. He creates his text as he goes, picking new routes through old themes.[26]

This suggests the standardised patterns of folk story structure (such as, for example, Freytag's pyramid) are not just ways of building drama, but are also mnemonic devices. And, furthermore, that they are mnemonic devices not just for perfect reproduction, but for retelling, that, like Bartlett's students' retellings of *The War of the Ghosts*, can transform the story, again and again. Be it *The War of the Ghosts*, or the *Ramayana*, or the tale of Jagathram Roy, the folk tale — the story — can be understood as, par excellence, the open and relational work.

rebuilding stories

And so might be for buildings. Like folk tales, Buildings are retold all the time. They outlive the people who made them, the purposes for which they were made, the technologies that made them, and the cultures that thought them beautiful. Once that happens, buildings are available for re-use, and the ways in which that happens are strikingly similar to the ways

in which folk tales are retold, as a simultaneous process of preservation and transformation.

In all these instances the building remains, recognisably, a thing. Even when, like the ruins of Rome, it is buried, its form can dictate the morphology of the city built above. Even when the temple has been repainted multiple times, its original form is still visible, and the ritual and the practice purpose of the repainting remains the same. But its authorship, as well as its form, is transformed; with each new intervention, a new set of building users become not just audiences, but co-authors, performers: the re-tellers of stories.

And so buildings can operate, over time, as open works. The architects Paul Emmons and Luc Phinney write:

> It has long been accepted that buildings tell stories. They do not, however, always tell the stories their original makers intend, or even understand. Buildings offer stories that frequently exceed their architects' plans.[27]

The construction of the stories themselves, in this essay, is designed to form this very invitation to retelling. It does so through the production of drawings. *Brothers Tell Tales*, for example, begins with one.

protocol three: unplanning on paper

The stories you read here have been generated, as retellings, by the museum and the images on its walls.

Inspired by these images, I have created drawings to add to the museum's collection. Like the museum, these drawings are designed to invite retelling — not just in their final form, but through their making, too.

In this I am following the work of the Glaswegian artist Mitch Miller, whose collaboratively produced 'dialectograms' are designed to draw out the conflicts, narratives, and dialogues that are present in shared spaces.[28]

The process of creating these images is as follows:

— I agree with the AHRG upon sites to document and the AHRG make contact with the communities who occupy these sites to obtain their consent for what we are about to do.

— At a time agreed, we arrive on the site, with an A1 drawing board and white paper, and, after a few preparatory sketches, I start to lay out a drawing of the site.

A few asides on these drawings as drawings:

— I use my body to measure the buildings, rather than a tape or laser device. This creates a sort of performance as I pace up and down, holding my arms or feet against walls or doors.

— This less precise form of measurement also means it makes more sense to draw these drawings freehand rather than hardline, making the process quicker, and easier for my audience to read.

The projections I use are designed with the following considerations in mind:

— It is important the drawings are legible from all directions when laid out horizontally. They are designed to be engaged with by a group of people standing around them — both during the process of drawing and afterwards.

— Section and elevation predominate over plan: these projections will be more recognisable to participants unversed in architectural drawing conventions.

As I draw, because I am large, white, and alien, I attract crowds of people, some of whom watch, some of whom talk to one another, and some of whom ask me questions about what I am doing.

I am not working on my own — one of my partners is also there to help translate if members of this crowd do not speak English.

I explain what I am doing, but we also ask questions — What is this building used for? When was it built? Who built it? What has happened since?

Sometimes, we write down the answers on the drawing. At other times others write them themselves. Sometimes their answers disagree and, where I can, I record these disagreements on the drawing. This is, after all, an attempt to draw as a form of retelling.

As this process takes place over several hours, we hear the same stories again and again, elaborated, shifted, retold. Making the drawings is a way of creating this time for retelling.

Later, I collage in photographs of the buildings, to the drawings, to occupy the buildings they re-story — with the people who live in them, or who have gathered to see the drawing being drawn, and, of course the drawer himself. The drawings record not just their ostensible subject — the building — but also the process of their own making.

Once this process is complete, we print out the final image and return to give it to the people we have met there, as a gift. Another print is given to the museum. Both gifts will act, I hope, as provocations to new rounds of retelling. Indeed, they have been to be retold: just short enough, I hope, to hook a reader; each one is 'snagged' with an out-of-place detail: odd enough to suggest explanation, without providing it.

I contribute these stories to the museum as a sort of offering. In doing so, I hope to contribute, to the people of Asansol, stories as tools to help them understand how they arrived in their present and, thereby, how they might make of it their own future.

conclusion

This essay tells three stories: about the house of a colonial steel executive, squatted in by the descendants of his servants; a sweet shop that might, or might not, be a literary monument; a village square where, once upon a time, a poet retold an old story. These stories contribute new empirical evidence about how interiors are unplanned — in this case, through the process of post-colonial change and industrial churn.

The research for these stories contributes new thinking to the practices of writing and drawing about architecture and place as a re-productive act. It describes how processes of drawing and writing have been used to unplan these stories, inviting their retelling. And to create chronotopic models of the spaces and times of these interiors.

Finally, these efforts have been situated within discourses about the relationship between building and story, using structuralist understandings of literature to understand how stories can create times and spaces, and considerations of the open work and the folk tale to think through how the plots and plans of stories and buildings can be unplotted and unplanned, opening up, in the process, new creative possibilities for stories, buildings, and interiors.

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author biography

Edward Hollis trained as an architect and is now professor of interior design at the University of Edinburgh in the UK. He is the author of several books, including *The Secret Lives of Buildings* (2009) and *The Memory Palace: A Book of Lost Interiors* (2013).

notes

1 All quotations in the three stories chronicled in this essay are not literal transcriptions of speech from the field work undertaken for this research. Rather, they are, in some cases, translations of Bengali speech, or re-draftings and re-presentations by the author, made from field notes taken on site that were recorded on the drawing about each story. Due to the extensive use of these quotations in each story, only the first quotation in each is cited and all others follow the same citation; Edward Hollis, field notes on drawing of visit to Bhoot Bangla, April 2023.

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unplanned interiors as care: trauma-informed design and everyday spatial practices in women's refuges

Samantha Donnelly
University of Technology Sydney
0000-0001-8558-8285

abstract

Women's refuges rely on adaptable, unplanned interiors as a critical component of trauma-informed care for women and children escaping domestic and family violence. This essay examines the spatial dynamics of planned and unplanned interiors through a feminist lens, conceptualising the refuge not as a fixed design but as a living system co-created through acts of maintenance, adjustment, and relational care. By focusing on the spatial interior and challenging assumptions about design quality and spatial order, the study positions design as an everyday, collaborative process shaped by workers and residents.

Drawing on feminist design theory, trauma-informed care, and feminist care ethics, the essay argues for greater recognition of workers' spatial practices and the informal, often improvised transformations that respond to diverse cultural, emotional, and familial needs. Based on site visits to twenty-six refuges throughout New South Wales, Australia, and interviews with forty-eight workers, the research identifies strategies that support safety and recovery, including creating zones for retreat, softening institutional features, and introducing familiar domestic cues. Findings highlight the significance of unplanned interiors in enabling flexibility and choice, resisting prescriptive notions of safety, and accommodating evolving needs. The essay positions trauma-informed interior design as an adaptive, collaborative process that centres care, agency, and lived experience within spatial practice.

keywords

trauma-informed design; domestic and family violence; crisis accommodation; feminist care ethics; interior spatial design

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introduction

In Australia, women's refuges provide temporary accommodation and specialist support for women and children escaping domestic and family violence. These services emerged in the 1970s as feminist initiatives to create safe housing for women while exposing systemic failures to address male violence, and, since then, have operated within a 'wrap-around' service that recognises violence as a traumatic event requiring integrated responses including housing, counselling, and practical assistance.[1] Refuge workers are highly skilled in domestic and family violence services, guided by feminist principles and trauma-informed care, and many bring lived experience to their practice.[2] Many are also experts in creating safe, comfortable, and trauma-informed interior environments with limited resources, and without specialist design training.

Most refuges occupy existing family dwellings adapted to provide safe, anonymous, homelike environments for multiple unrelated women and families, alongside offices for specialist teams.[3] On-site services typically include counselling, childcare support, legal advice, advocacy, group therapy, and outreach services, with workers available during business hours and on-call for emergencies.[4] Accommodation models vary: shared refuges offer private bedrooms with communal kitchens, bathrooms, and living areas, while self-contained refuges provide independent living units with adjacent separate communal spaces and administrative offices. These models reflect different approaches to privacy, autonomy, and social interaction, and require different spatial arrangements. While shared refuges typically occupy single or adjoining buildings, self-contained refuges can be free-standing units, clustered, or adjoining, with a separate office space on the same site.

Refuges are confidential sites hidden within residential streets and little is known about their interior worlds. Beyond the protective exterior, the less visible spatial arrangements play a vital role in enabling personalised responses to trauma, through both planned and unplanned spatial strategies that reflect relationships between people, care, and place.[5] Their interiors are not static backdrops but evolving frameworks that support safety, agency, and care through everyday acts of adaptation and maintenance, negotiated by the workers and residents. As places of recovery, refuge services depend on both planned and unplanned interiors to meet the evolving needs of their transitory populations of women and children.

Despite their critical role, most refuge services face chronic underfunding and capacity pressures, and many regularly exceed funded bed numbers, by relying on workers' ingenuity to 'make space' for incoming families. Limited housing pathways for exiting residents cause bottlenecks, leaving women and children in temporary accommodation for extended periods.[6] These constraints, combined with the urgency and unpredictability of refuge entry, shape interiors as dynamic, negotiated spaces rather than fixed designs, required to support the trauma-informed care received on site. Yet, despite growing interest in trauma-informed practice, scholarship rarely addresses the spatial dimension of care within refuges or the role of unplanned interiors in shaping recovery. Existing published research largely includes broad design guidelines that prioritise technical standards over lived experience, overlooking the dynamic interplay between institutional planning and user adaptation.

This essay addresses this gap by examining how planned and unplanned interiors influence safety, agency, and care in Australian refuges by comparing two real-life case studies: a shared refuge with unplanned interiors and a self-contained refuge with planned interiors. Through feminist spatial theory, trauma-informed design, and ethics of care, it argues for co-design and flexibility as essential principles in future refuge designs and highlights the value of both planned and unplanned interiors in supporting trauma-informed care.

planned and unplanned interiors: a dynamic relationship

The distinction between planned and unplanned interiors in women's refuge accommodation is neither fixed nor straightforward and is deeply tied to social, emotional, and spatial dynamics that shape everyday life in these settings. While both planned and unplanned spaces aim to provide safety, comfort, and empowerment, they differ in their emphasis on spatial agency, flexibility, and temporality. Planned interiors typically refer to spaces intentionally arranged for specific purposes such as living areas, offices, or counselling rooms, alongside utility zones predetermined by function (kitchens, bathrooms, laundries) and spaces defined by their location within the building, such as entries or communal lounges. These spaces often signal professionalism and therapeutic intent, aligning with institutional expectations of order and control. For example, in Case One, a self-contained refuge demonstrates how planned interiors promote calm and privacy through deliberate choices of material, colour, and lighting, and clear separation of living and working functions.

By contrast, unplanned interiors emerge through necessity, often in response to urgent demand or limited resources. They include rooms repurposed for additional sleeping arrangements or communal spaces adapted for therapeutic or social activities such as children's play, or art therapy. In Case Two, a shared refuge illustrates this dynamic: a living room originally intended for social interaction is regularly transformed into a play zone or group therapy space, requiring workers to rearrange furniture and negotiate competing needs. While frequently perceived as temporary or chaotic, unplanned interiors can be adaptive, relational, and responsive to lived experience, challenging assumptions that only design experts create successful spaces and ignoring aesthetic rules.

Planned and unplanned strategies frequently blur in practice. In all refuge types, entry zones require careful safety planning and fixed security features such as layered entry sequences, controlled sightlines, and protected doorways to ensure physical safety. Yet entries also feature flexible arrangements, including artworks to enhance cultural safety and inclusion and children's furniture to increase relational safety.[7] Rigidly planned communal areas may inhibit participation for trauma survivors who avoid large social settings, whereas adaptable layouts provide choice and agency, encouraging residents to codesign shared spaces. These blurred relationships between planned and unplanned zones are necessary to ensure refuge interiors are safe yet responsive to incoming residents' needs.

The tension between planned and unplanned interiors is particularly evident in the shift toward self-contained refuge models, often promoted as best-practice solutions to overcrowding and conflict in shared settings.[8] Self-contained refuges offer privacy, autonomy, and a sense of normalcy for displaced families, while providing workers with professional office spaces.[9] However, this shift away from shared models also signals a departure from grassroots feminist traditions that emphasised collective living and solidarity.[10] Shared refuges, though less structured, often enable informal social support through spontaneous interactions in kitchens or living areas, illustrating the relational value of unplanned spaces, but also the negative impact of reduced access to privacy and independence for residents and workers.

Ultimately, the real significance of refuge interiors lies not in their static design but in their capacity to evolve through everyday negotiation between institutional planning and user adaptation. Planned interiors provide structure and predictability, essential for trauma-informed care, yet it is often the unplanned, flexible zones that allow residents and workers to shape their environment in meaningful ways. These hybrid spatial logics, where design intent intersects with lived experience, reveal the need for participatory approaches that embed adaptability as a core principle in future refuge design.

feminist spatial theory, care ethics, and trauma-informed care and design

Feminist spatial theory offers a critical lens for understanding how space is produced, experienced, and contested, particularly by women in contexts of marginalisation and trauma-informed care. Social scientist Doreen Massey's influential work positions space as relational, dynamic, and socially constructed, rather than fixed or neutral.[11] This perspective challenges deterministic views of spatial design and supports an understanding of refuge interiors as shaped through lived experience and social interactions between residents and workers. Massey's observation that 'the impetus to motion and mobility, for a space of flows, can only be achieved through the construction of (temporary, provisional) stabilisations' speaks to the transient nature of refuge life.[12]

Significant in refuge settings where notions of 'home' intersect with cultural identity, safety, and gendered inequality, bell hooks' concept of 'homeplace' frames domestic space as politically and emotionally charged, positioning refuges as sites of recovery, solidarity, and resistance rather than mere shelters.[13] The political dimension of refuge interiors is further illuminated by architectural theorist Jane Rendell, who writes of 'critical spatial practice' as 'practices that resist dominant social orders'.[14] Rendell emphasises the interior as a historically marginalised domain associated with women's work, yet central to negotiations between space, subjectivity, and care.[15] Together these theorists provide a foundation for interrogating how examples of planned and unplanned interiors disrupt gendered power dynamics and prioritise relational care.

Theorisations of care adopted in this study include feminist care ethics and trauma-informed care. Feminist care ethics foregrounds relational responsiveness, flexibility, and inclusivity, resisting institutional models of support. Political scientist Joan Tronto defines care as 'everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our "world" so that we can live in it as well as possible'.[16] This framing validates refuge interiors that evolve through lived experience rather than rigid design standards, recognising care as deeply human, political, and sometimes messy. It also reflects workers' labour in maintaining and creating refuge environments. Unplanned interiors exemplify this ethic by facilitating personalised responses and collaborative spatial practices. Trauma-informed care, widely adopted as best-practice in Australian domestic and family violence services, shifts from hierarchical practitioner-patient models to partnerships where survivors are active experts.[17] It prioritises physical and emotional safety, choice, and trust while avoiding re-traumatisation.[18] Importantly, trauma-informed care extends beyond programming to include spatial and material conditions that shape residents' and workers' sense of control and wellbeing through the deliberate construction of supportive environments.

Trauma-informed design is the application of trauma-informed care principles to the design of built environments: architecture, interior design, landscape

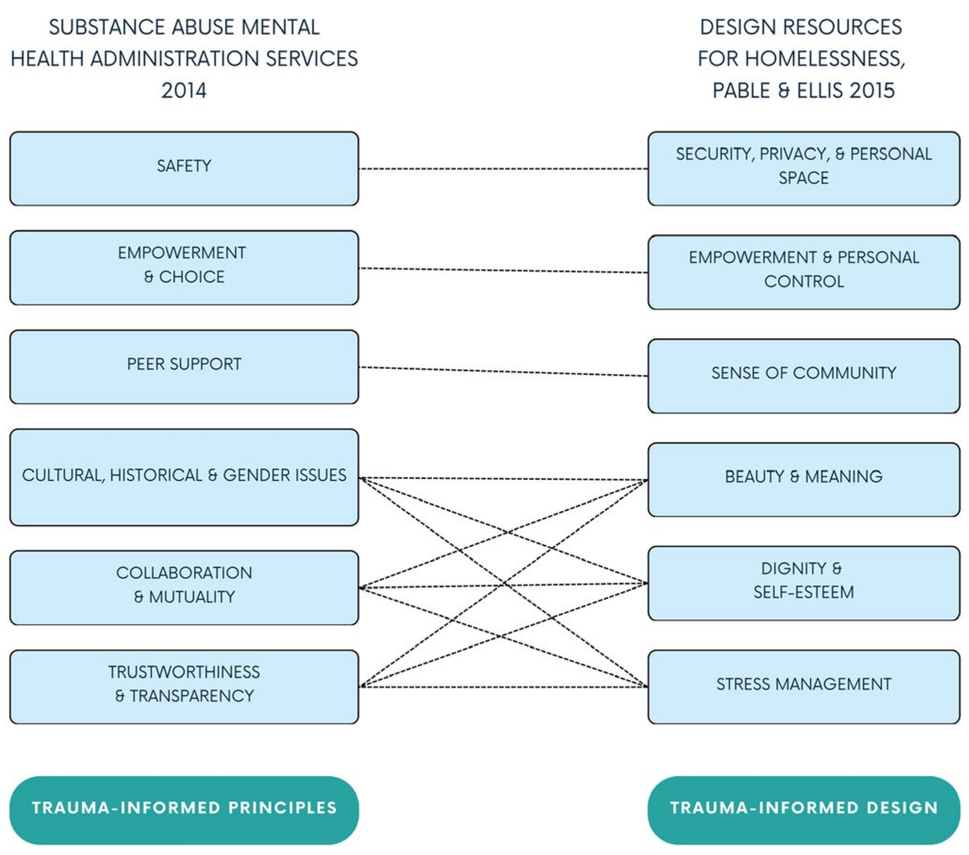


Figure 01.
Diagram of relationships between trauma-informed care and trauma-informed design, based on Cuningham, *Through the lens of trauma-informed design*, 2023 <https://cuningham.com/news/through-lens-trauma-informed-design> [accessed 22 October 2024].

architecture, and user experiences [Fig. 01]. Interior spaces are central to the integration of its principles, demonstrated in the work of Jill Pable and Anna Ellis, who identify strategies that reduce stress, support self-regulation, and foster recovery in homelessness and refuge settings with a focus on interior design.[19] Using pre- and post-occupancy research, Shopworks Architecture Group and the University of Denver demonstrate how trauma-informed design improves outcomes in crisis accommodation, defining spatial qualities in built projects.[20]

Key spatial considerations in trauma-informed design include spatial layout, lighting, acoustics, thermal comfort, furniture selection, and access to nature.[21] Poorly designed environments, characterised by institutional layouts, insufficient privacy, excessive noise, or lack of daylight, can undermine trauma-informed care, intensifying anxiety, disempowerment, and emotional distress. In contrast, well-designed interiors enhance perceived safety, reduce environmental stressors, and offer residents greater control and comfort in their surroundings. These studies highlight the critical role of interiors in promoting safety and dignity, reinforcing the need for design approaches that integrate flexibility and co-design.

methodology and case studies

The following case studies draw on findings from the author's doctoral research (2018–2024) that examined how building types influence care practices in refuge workplaces and how trauma-informed design can enhance physical environments. The research involved site visits to twenty-six refuges across urban, suburban, and regional areas of New South Wales, Australia, and semi-structured interviews with forty-eight refuge workers. These interviews focused on workers' lived experience of delivering safe, private, and therapeutic accommodation within resource constraints and often unsuitable housing stock. Site visits and interviews provided rich, collaborative insights into how workers adapt interiors to meet residents' needs and their own practice requirements. Discussions focused on how trauma-informed care was supported or hindered by building design and how workers modified spaces to respond to changing circumstances.

The analysis of the interviews and site observations in these case studies was supported by existing scholarly literature, to trace connections between trauma-informed care and the design of refuge interiors. Workers' descriptions of spatial arrangements, and their impact on living conditions for women and children, provided the context to each case study. Freehand drawings translated site observations without compromising the anonymity of sites or inhabitants, while capturing intimate, mundane, material, and emotional qualities of spaces that are frequently missed in traditional architectural analyses. Additionally, these drawing practices introduce a clear relationship between the drawer and the subject, and the researcher's role in recognising and translating the spatial strategies at work in refuge environments.

The two selected case studies illustrate contrasting spatial logics: highly planned interiors versus unplanned, flexible arrangements. These real-world examples highlight differences between shared and self-contained refuge models and the roles of planned and unplanned interiors in promoting safety, agency, and care.

case one: a highly planned refuge interior

Case One describes a purpose-built, self-contained refuge accommodating eight families and eighteen workers across four single-level buildings. The site features six two-bedroom accessible units arranged in pairs, along with a separate administration building at the street frontage [Fig. 02]. The domestic scale and construction mirror surrounding dwellings, deliberately blending into the existing streetscape. The interiors of the accommodation units are modern and highly standardised, featuring large bedrooms with

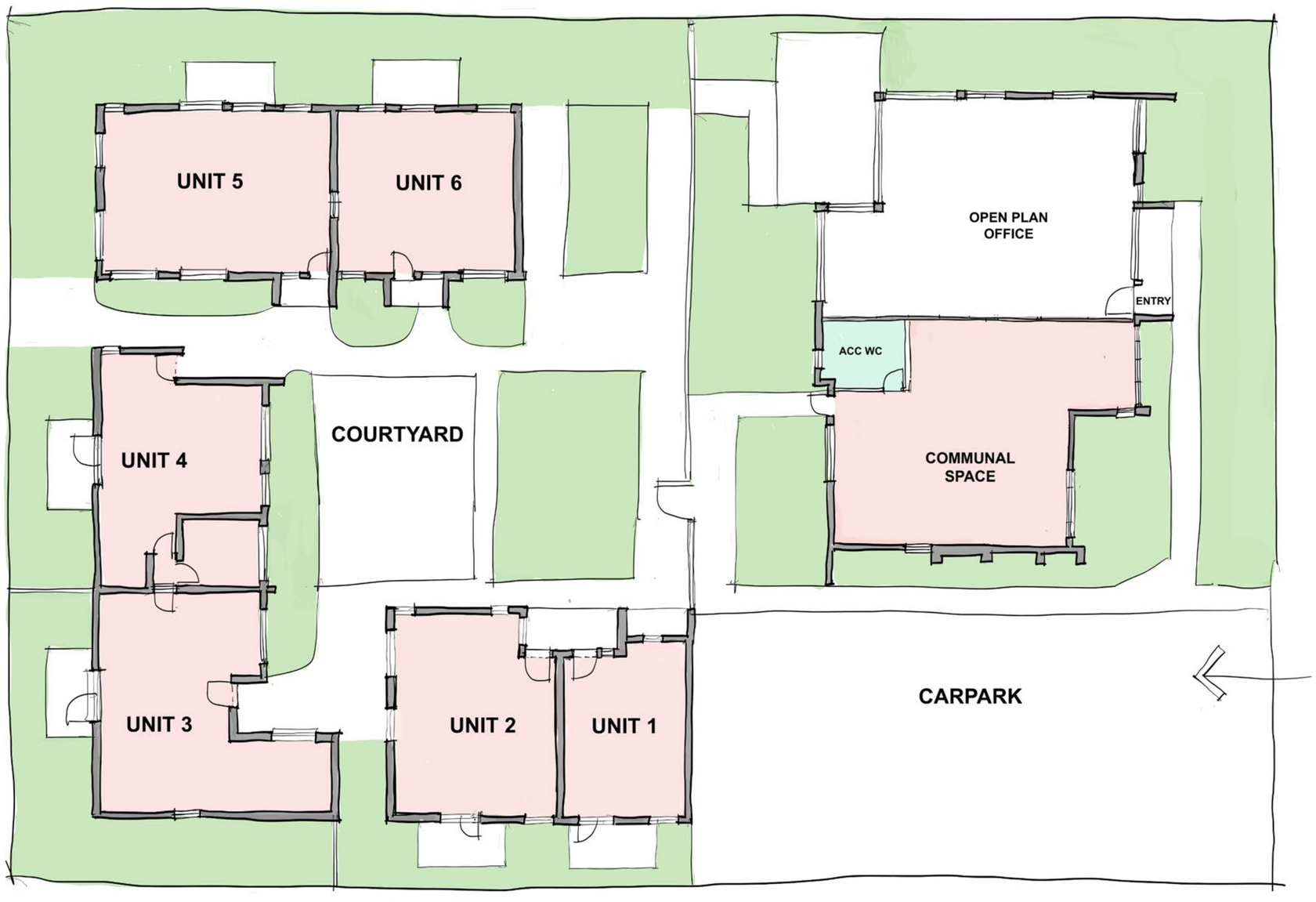


Figure 02.
Case One self-contained refuge floor plan. Unplanned zones are pink, planned zones are white, and shared bathrooms are blue. Accommodation units are shown as unplanned due to their flexibility and options to combine units for larger families. They are also ideal for families with teenage boys, pets, neurodiverse people, and families who need cultural safety. Illustration: Samantha Donnelly, 2024.

multiple beds and built-in storage, accessible bathroom, and open-plan kitchen, dining, and living areas. Units are identically furnished with matching furniture, artwork, and lighting, requiring minimal modification for residents. Compared to traditional shared refuges, these offer high levels of privacy, autonomy, and a sense of normal family life. The administration building includes open-plan offices for eighteen workers, consultation rooms, crisis units, a communal kitchen and living area, and a playroom, providing a professional environment rarely achieved in retrofitted dwellings.

case two: an unplanned, flexible refuge interior

Case Two is a shared refuge housed in a repurposed family dwelling built in the 1980s. The former bedrooms at the front have been converted into offices and consultation rooms, with an existing kitchen shared by workers and residents. Existing bedrooms have been adapted to accommodate multiple beds for families with access to two shared bathrooms and an accessible shower. A communal kitchen and dining area occupy the centre of the property [Fig. 03]. Furnishings are predominantly donated, and room sizes and layouts are generally similar. The spatial layout provides separation between the private bedroom areas and the more social kitchen and living areas of the house; however, proximity between families often leads to conflict over noise and shared facilities. The site provides access to unplanned communal zones, including a teenagers' retreat, children's playroom, group activities room, and various garden spaces — offering opportunities for social connection and respite, despite spatial constraints.

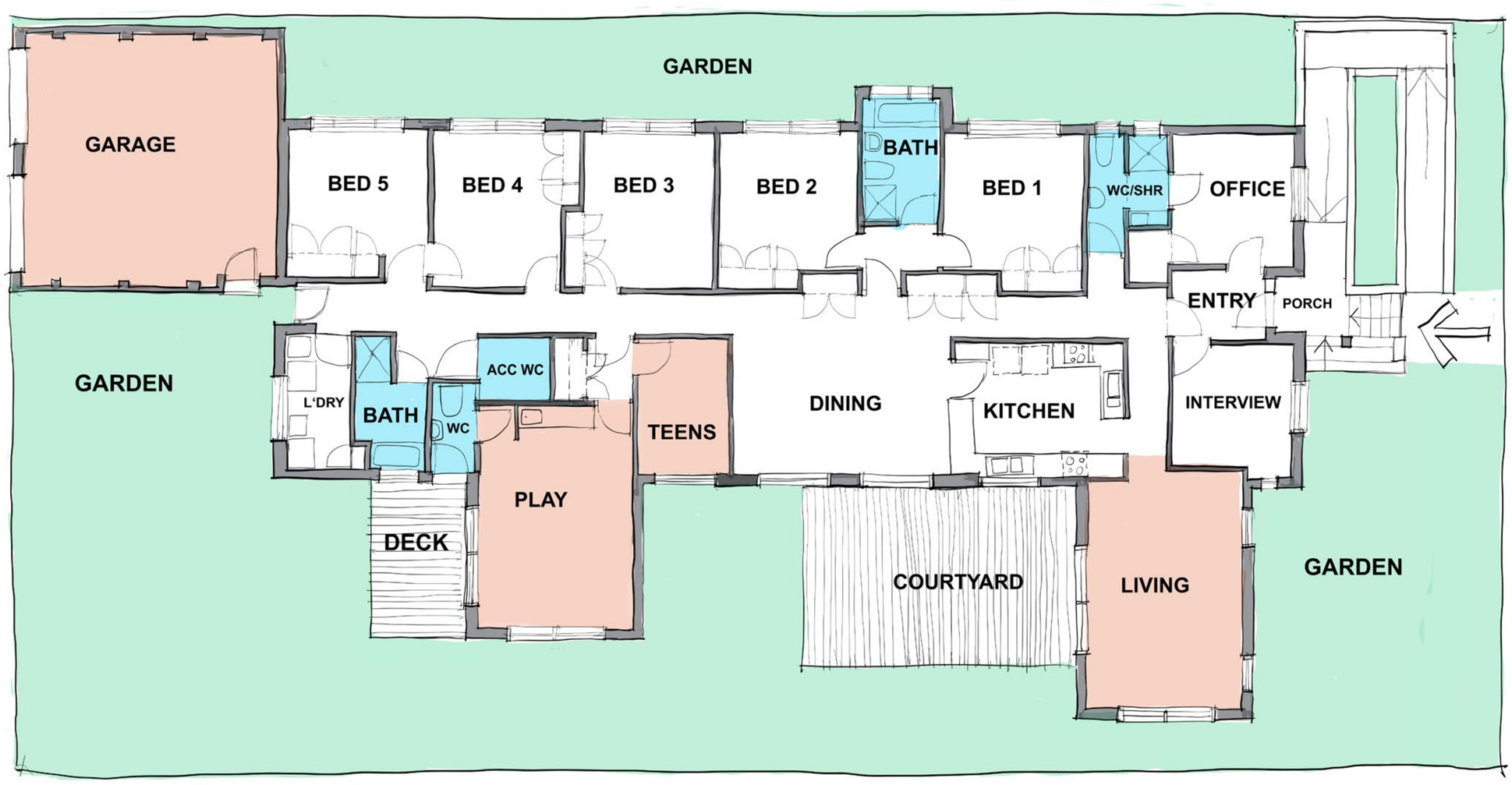


Figure 03.
Case Two shared refuge floor plan. Unplanned zones are pink, planned zones are white, and shared bathrooms are blue. Bedrooms are less flexible compared to self-contained accommodation, but living spaces and the garage are easily adapted. Illustration: Samantha Donnelly, 2024.

the reality of both planned and unplanned refuge interiors

Refuge interiors are typically complex, animated, constantly changing, and a significant part of women and children's perceptions of homeliness and recovery. Care is experienced in women's refuges as an everyday process with ongoing and unstructured interactions between residents and workers. These moments are not always recognised as therapeutic but are essential for recovery and depend on supportive physical environments.[22] Additionally, the typical practice of transforming former family dwellings into refuges involves minimal architectural intervention but significant and ongoing interior reconfiguration to accommodate multiple unrelated women or families with on-site support. As a result, these spaces are 'always under construction', as Massey suggests, shaped by relationships between people, place, and materiality.[23] Interior design in refuges is rarely the work of design professionals; instead, workers and residents engage in 'everyday design', rearranging and adapting spaces to meet practical and emotional needs.[24] As described by one worker from a suburban refuge:

> We are proud of our refuge. We try hard to have a conducive environment. It's important for healing [...] It's difficult because it tries to imitate home but it's a workplace. A lot of things that you would do at home, you can't do in a workplace, like letting kids in the kitchen [...] It's an environment that must be managed delicately but I think we're proud of trying to keep it welcoming.

Each refuge is unique in layout and location, resulting in a mix of planned and unplanned interiors. Workers are skilled in creating homelike environments using familiar objects — often donated — and tailoring sleeping arrangements for children of various ages. Although these efforts are important in the delivery of

care, the temporary nature of refuge stays, typically six weeks to several months, limits personalisation and challenges the 'sense of home.'[25] Returning to hooks' notion of 'homeplace' as a site of recovery and resistance, the emphasis shifts from delivering homelike environments to a focus on trauma-informed care and recovery, highlighting the labour involved in creating environments to prioritise safety, emotional stability, and pathways to autonomy.[26]

Despite refuges' provision of safety and care, for many women, living in a refuge is a last resort.[27] The mundane materialities of refuge interiors, with spatial arrangements for social and therapeutic activities, and children's play spaces perform critical work in supporting recovery for residents, but planned and unplanned environments remain temporary retreats, not long-term homes. The reality of refuge interiors is that these densely inhabited sites work hard to support complex relationships between residents, workers, and their built and natural environments, where workers carefully curate interiors to make space for trauma, to acknowledge and provide places for recovery from violence. These practices reveal interior design as a socio-material process, where adaptability and relationality displace formal aesthetics, positioning refuges as complex environments of care and dignity rather than mere shelters.

role of planned and unplanned interiors in refuges

Understanding the role of unplanned refuge interiors requires analysis of how workers and residents inhabit, adapt, and continually reconfigure interiors to meet their needs. The distinction between planned and unplanned interiors is not binary, but relational, shaped by social, emotional, and spatial dynamics. Planned interiors are intentionally designed by architects, designers, or service providers to achieve specific goals, including safety, privacy, therapeutic support, and opportunities for social connection. In contrast, unplanned interiors emerge organically through improvisation and resourcefulness, responding to immediate needs, constraints, and lived realities. Unplanned does not imply disorder; rather, it signals flexibility and responsiveness. These interiors play a critical yet often overlooked role in enabling personalised care and accommodating the unpredictable nature of refuge life, while also exposing inconsistencies in care delivery and resident engagement.

Case One illustrates how planned interiors in a self-contained refuge promote calm and order through deliberate choices of furnishing, material, colour, and lighting. Self-contained units enhance privacy, agency, and independence, reducing the need to share facilities. For workers, purpose-built offices provide access to professional, private, and flexible workplaces that support trauma-informed principles of choice and control, collaboration, and peer support. However, overly prescriptive planning can undermine these principles, as institutional furniture and lighting in communal areas may evoke feelings of power and control, discouraging residents and workers from adapting the spaces to their needs.

Case Two highlights certain planned interiors in communal facilities, including kitchens, laundries, and bathrooms, where organisation is essential for multiple unrelated families. Despite their organisation to reduce conflict through strategies such as lockable storage, multiple refrigerators, and additional cooking appliances, these spaces often remain labour-intensive and contested [Fig. 04].

> Sometimes the house dynamics can become a bit toxic. It's asking a lot of women to try and heal and address their traumas when they also have to share a bathroom and small kitchen.
>
> *(Refuge manager, regional NSW)*

Across all refuges, entry sequences are carefully planned to create 'environments that are safe while also inviting', reflecting Pable and Ellis's emphasis on trauma-informed principles of safety, trust, and community in homelessness settings.[28] Perceptions of safety rely on both visibility and concealment, described by Owen and Crane as the 'presence of safety features and the absence of threats.'[29] Clear



Figure 04.
Communal kitchen in a shared refuge, where workers have added a stepped platform to enable children to safely participate. Illustration: Samantha Donnelly, 2024.

sightlines and 'prospect-refuge' conditions can reduce anxiety for hypervigilant residents, illustrating how occupants benefit through increased feelings of safety and consistency through planning.[30] In Case One, the separation of self-contained units and offices minimises conflict by increasing privacy, but also increases social isolation for families.[31] Workers in Case One reported a need to plan social activities and arrange opportunities for residents to interact, through shared meals, movie nights, and children's entertainment, more than in shared refuges, where residents are more socially independent as an outcome of limited space.

Unplanned interiors reflect the transitional nature of refuge life through adaptable, collaborative spaces that accommodate cultural, spiritual, and personal practices. Self-contained units, as in Case One, while planned environments, are able to accept male teenagers, extended families, and pets, by providing separation between living units, increasing residents' independence and privacy. Features such as pet-friendly zones, durable flooring, outdoor access, and quiet resting areas, acknowledge pets as emotional companions, reinforcing continuity and recovery.[32]

> We need spaces where they can bring their animals, and land adjacent for large animals, because that's a massive barrier for regional women, particularly for older women who have companion animals. We take birds, cats, dogs, fish, ferrets, rabbits, and chooks.
>
> *(Worker, regional refuge)*

Unplanned interiors in both Case One and Case Two examples enable workers and residents to co-design spaces to meet their needs, including the creation of teenage retreats for gaming and internet access, or homework rooms for school-age children. For example, in Case One, dual-key access between units enables services to accommodate larger families when required, showing how the interiors remain fixed but circulation is adapted. While in Case Two, interior arrangements, not circulation, are reconfigured to meet the accommodation and social needs of resident communities.

how workers create spaces to address trauma-informed care

In practice, refuge workers adapt spaces by softening institutional features, introducing familiar objects, and creating zones for quiet reflection or communal gathering, often without formal architectural intervention. The material environment plays a critical role in care practices, as highlighted in scholarship on the 'materialities of care.'[33] Mundane objects, furniture, kitchen items, and soft furnishings, and the arrangement of rooms help restore stability and familiarity for women who have lost the routines and objects of home. However, persistent funding constraints mean most refuges occupy retrofitted housing, requiring workers to 'make do' with available resources while ensuring safety and care.[34] Their everyday design strategies are not merely practical; they are deeply ethical, grounded in feminist principles of care that prioritise agency, empathy, and collaboration. Despite the spatial nature of this work, it remains largely absent from professional discourse on design and planning, and workers are rarely acknowledged as skilled trauma-informed designers.

Trauma-informed interiors can reduce stress and enhance perceptions of control and independence for both residents and workers by creating calm, well-ordered environments that offer opportunities for retreat and access to restorative landscapes.[35] Safety within refuges operates on multiple levels. Physical safety is ensured through secure entry points and controlled access. Psychological safety depends on autonomy, privacy, and control, such as the ability to adjust lighting, noise, or spatial boundaries.[36] Relational safety emerges through workers' presence and trust-building practices, often supported by spatial arrangements that enable discreet observation and timely intervention. Importantly, perceptions of safety vary. What feels safe for one woman may feel threatening to another, reflecting diverse experiences of violence.[37]

> It can be really scary sitting within your own four walls, so it's striking that balance between your own safe space and to have company when you need it.
>
> *(Worker, regional refuge)*

McLane and Pable emphasise the importance of interior environments in promoting safety, reducing stress, and supporting wellbeing.[38] Communal and therapeutic spaces, often shaped through necessity rather than formal design, demonstrate how interiors respond through flexible planning. Unplanned interiors allow for fluidity, accommodating shifting needs without prescribing a single notion of safety or comfort. Workers employ strategies to minimise sensory overload and avoid triggers using natural materials, calming colours, and quality lighting to support circadian rhythms. Safe social connection is enabled through shared zones where residents can choose to engage, with flexible seating arrangements and spaces to retreat, and semi-open layouts allow residents to participate as passive observers or active contributors, as illustrated in Figure 05.[39] Storage solutions reduce clutter, while acoustic and thermal comfort enhance autonomy and wellbeing. Although often dismissed as aesthetic, these elements are integral to trauma-informed care and should inform future design collaborations between architects, interior designers, and refuge practitioners.

However, unplanned interiors can also present challenges, particularly for workers. Offices frequently serve multiple roles: entry points, confidential meeting space, crisis response hubs, and places of research



Figure 05.
Group activity room interior in a self-contained refuge. Unplanned spaces look disordered at times, depending on the residents' needs. Illustration: Samantha Donnelly, 2024.

to support funding applications, yet often lack basic amenities or respite areas. While flexibility benefits residents, it can signal underinvestment for workers' spaces. Missing in discussions about future refuge design is the vital collaborative role workers play in the translation of care needs and lived experience of refuge systems. As experts in trauma-informed practice, refuge workers are important co-designers, inverting the traditional top-down approach to design where architects initiate and control the design process. Ensuring workers' collaboration embeds the experiences and voices of women within the design, particularly important for First Nations women and other marginalised groups, and reflects the principles that sustain trauma-informed care.

reflection on implications for policy, design education, and feminist practice

Historically, spatial designers have had limited involvement in women's refuge design, particularly where services adapt existing housing stock with minimal resources. The emergence of trauma-informed practice has renewed attention to the built environment's role in care delivery and opened opportunities for research to inform future refuge developments. Design responsibility extends beyond technical delivery to encompass long-term social, psychological, and environmental impacts. Tronto's feminist ethics of care calls for a shift from viewing buildings as static objects to recognising their responsibility to care, emphasising values of

repair, preservation, and sustainability: 'Architects have responsibility to turn power in design towards caring for a broken world.'[40] Yet, designers often lack experience in this domain. Collaborations with domestic and family violence services can be hindered by confidentiality requirements, gendered dynamics within the construction industry, and unfamiliarity with trauma-informed principles. While toolkits and design guides provide entry points, they frequently overlook systemic challenges such as chronic underfunding, overcapacity, and the need for ongoing spatial adaptation.

Funding constraints severely limit opportunities for new large-scale developments and refuges will continue to rely on ageing housing stock or retrofitted buildings. With services operating at full capacity and under financial precarity, major renovations or new builds remain rare. A recent Australian survey indicates workers' preference for diverse accommodation types, including self-contained units, revealing a recognition that both shared and self-contained types will be required.[41] A recognition of unplanned interiors as valuable assets is needed, to enable workers to reconfigure spaces while maintaining safety and supporting care practices, without substantial capital investment while ensuring spatial quality and performance.

Design experts must acknowledge that they cannot fully comprehend the trauma experienced by residents. Their role is to create environments that facilitate recovery without judgement, assumptions, or prescriptive notions of safety. Embedding flexibility within design projects allows specialist workers to activate everyday design strategies alongside residents. While this approach challenges conventional design norms, its value in promoting collaboration and dynamic co-design ensures refuge interiors remain responsive to evolving needs through an ongoing exchange between people and place.

conclusion

This essay demonstrates that refuge interiors are not static environments, but dynamic systems shaped through ongoing interaction between residents, workers, and material settings. Drawing on insights from interior design, trauma-informed care, and feminist ethics of care, it argues that unplanned interiors are integral to creating conditions of safety, dignity, and recovery. These spaces challenge idealised notions of therapeutic environments by enabling homelike qualities to emerge through everyday acts of arrangement, maintenance, and adaptation.

Three key contributions emerge. First, unplanned interiors support diverse care practices by allowing occupants to personalise space, mitigating the pressures of communal living while enabling both retreat and connection. Second, refuge workers act as everyday designers, using spatial strategies to respond to trauma and maintain safety. Their expertise should be recognised and embedded within formal design processes. Third, spatial designers have an ethical responsibility to collaborate with refuge services, incorporating flexible zones into new and existing facilities to accommodate evolving needs that cannot be fully anticipated in conventional plans. Trauma-informed design that integrates unplanned interiors offers a framework for responsive, inclusive environments. Future research and policy must prioritise co-design approaches, funding models, and regulatory frameworks that embed flexibility and collaboration as core principles in the development of crisis accommodation.

acknowledgements

Thanks to the specialist domestic and family violence workers in NSW refuges for providing access to their services and consent to inclusion of their voices. Your commitment and expertise remain critical to the fight against violence towards women and children, and you have taught me that the quality of physical place is integral to recovery and to consider the importance of care in design.

author biography

Dr Samantha Donnelly is an architectural designer and academic in the School of Interior Architecture at University of Technology Sydney. Her research focuses on how tailored design can support specialist services for women and children leaving domestic violence, housing for older women, and the social impact of trauma-informed design for people who need safe, affordable, and sustainable homes and workplaces. This research is supported by Human Research Ethics approval # 17576 through Monash University.

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the 'detraditionalisation' of the domestic interior

Francesca Romana Forlini
New York Institute of Technology
0009-0008-4181-8622

abstract

Drawing on a close analysis of women's valuable contributions to the continuous design of Italian domestic interiors, this essay examines the nuanced processes of unplanning modernist dwellings as they materialise patriarchal systems of oppression. This study is based on feminist sociological theory, specifically Lisa Adkin's use of the concept of 'detraditionalisation', which highlights how traditional gender roles and spaces are destabilised in late modernity thanks to an increased reflexivity towards self- and gender identity. It focuses on the tensions that arise in an individual's relation with tradition, with clear implications on the planning, but also material and symbolic unplanning of interiors. This essay articulates the complex interplay between spatial systems of oppression and individual mechanisms of resistance highlighted by social theory and applies them to the domestic sphere. What emerges is the overlooked yet important contribution of women to the design of the home.

Part of a broader research project on post-war housing, this essay addresses contemporary domesticity in Italy, where a strong and nuanced relationship with tradition and patriarchy has historically shaped women's subjectivities and design choices. A closer look at Mario Ridolfi's Viale Etiopia housing complex in Rome (1955), supplemented by interviews with the inhabitants and photographs of its interiors, clarifies the dynamics anticipated above.

Through this study, detraditionalisation emerges as a new conceptual tool for the understanding of women's aesthetics and spatial design practices inside residential interiors. It also uncovers how socio-spatial change is gradually unfolding inside Italian homes, and how this has led to a partial unplanning of the Italian modernist dwelling. Detraditionalisation ultimately serves as a bridge between feminist sociology and architectural and interior design theory, enabling the formulation of alternative and more inclusive narratives in the history and theory of interior design and architecture.

keywords

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introduction

The conversation around gender and domesticity has advanced considerably in the last seven decades, moving away from the Western architectural canon to encompass multiple gender identities, in addition to social, cultural, and ethnic contexts.[1] However, the debate around the mechanisms that led to the consolidation of the Western home (designed for nuclear and heterosexual families) is not exhausted. It requires a disciplinary and epistemological shift away from canonical architectural history in order to be more inclusive of women's overlooked contributions. Architectural historians have demonstrated that symbolism associated with the male, 'public', and female, 'private', part of the house — usually referred to as the 'separate spheres paradigm' — is the most important boundary in a dwelling's design, and this dualism mirrors the heteronormative foundations of the Western home.[2] Feminine domesticity is socially and culturally produced and individually negotiated, but it is also closely tied to the domestic space and its interiors.[3] This leads to further considerations of women's nuanced processes of forming and consolidating their inner selves in the home, along with their spatial manifestations (such as caring and household management, domestic consumption, and interior decoration), which have been insufficiently explored so far. In fact, as a consequence of the institutionalised, physical, and symbolic framework that confined women to the domestic sphere, they have been historically forced to negotiate their personal identities through embodied and cultural acts, spatial modifications, and aesthetic choices.[4]

This essay brings forward a feminist focus on ordinary stories of self-identity formation, their impact on the continuous design and redesign of the domestic space, and their significance for architectural and interior design history. It applies the gender dualism in the home to the dichotomy between 'planned' and 'unplanned' interiors advanced in this journal issue. Indeed, intentional planning of Western domestic interiors is saturated with patriarchal values that, in turn, are resisted and dismantled — or physically and symbolically unplanned — by women's continuous design and appropriation of those same interior spaces. In other words, the fixity of the traditional patriarchal home is countered by the demolitions, flexible arrangements, and overall 'detraditionalisation' that women operate on those same material and symbolic divisions.[5] The 'planned' domestic interior is, thus, continuously subject to a daily 'unplanning' by the women who inhabit that same space. By following the theory of feminist sociologists Lisa Adkins and Beverly Skeggs, this essay demonstrates that through this nuanced unplanning of their own domestic interiors, women not only negotiate and define their own femininity and self-identity, but they are also design agents worthy of the design and architectural historian's attention.[6]

It is important to point out that this process is neither obvious nor clearly manifested. It is rather a nuanced interplay between mechanisms of internalisation and unconscious reproduction of stereotyped gender practices. It also includes small acts of resistance that are framed within known local, cultural boundaries — hence this essay's focus on a specific country, which will soon be addressed. Architectural historian and theorist Mark Wigley stressed more than once how women internalise the domestic, spatial order that confines them.[7] Spatial design exerts disciplinary power as it often reflects interiorised mechanisms of preproduction of modernist, sexist binary thinking that reinforce the aforementioned split between genders inside the domestic space.[8] Wigley believes 'the house enforces a pre-existing law [...]. The law of the house precedes the house', and, therefore, considers this authoritative, disciplinary power a 'pre-architectural domain of social order', claiming that the house is 'ignorant' of the 'violence it appears to frame.'[9] This research sees Wigley's 'pre-existing law' as a manifestation of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's habitus, which describes the internalised behaviours that are reproduced through enculturated acts and architectural design.[10] Notably, Wigley writes that

the domestic space fits within a 'patriarchal grid' (a planned, modernist home that reflects sexist principles), which distinctly recalls Bourdieu's idea of fitting subjective structures within objective frameworks for the reproduction of cultural capital and habitus.[11]

Adkins and Skeggs's work opens to social change through Bourdieu's theory; it is possible to determine that this 'fit' or, conversely, misalignment between the architectural plan and the inhabitant are the basis for, respectively, the reproduction of patriarchal order, or, alternatively, social and spatial change at both an individual and collective level.[12] Specifically, Adkins's feminist reading of the concept of detraditionalisation explains how, in late modernity, traditional social norms that govern gender roles and family structures are challenged thanks to an increased reflexivity towards one's self-identity, especially from a female perspective.[13] There exists, in fact, a direct relationship between individual acts and spatial change as a result of unplanning practices: modifications of the interior dwelling layout that emerge from the interaction with architectural space are driven both at a physical and intangible level by habitus and, from this interaction, individual selves and spaces are altered. These reflections intertwine with processes of consolidation of self-identity through homemaking, intimate practices, and object-related narratives.

It is then possible to outline a clear disconnection between male architects' ideological schemes and planned structures — materialised in the dwelling plan of the twentieth century — and feminine practices of resistance (including unplanning and detraditionalisation) that take place inside the home. This tension is particularly evident in housing projects built in the country under study: Italy. The spatialisation of gendered and enculturated practices can be easily read through an analysis of the middle-class apartment plan. Indeed, stereotypical heteropatriarchal and cultural codes, norms, and behaviours still play a crucial role in contemporary Italian domesticity. A clear example is the enculturated practice of preparing meals, which still confines women to the kitchen. Food plays a central role in Italy's national identity and influences not only Italians' daily life, but also the design of dwellings and women's gender and self-identity. The analysis of Italian apartments ultimately demonstrates that only a few social changes were registered by architects, which often reinforced traditional values through their architectural plans. Women, however, reacted to these circumstances by breaking the patriarchal, spatial order that forced them into their stereotypical roles and spaces, taking ownership of the continuous design of the domestic interior beyond its planned functions and spaces.

Feminist sociological theory by Atkins and Skeggs that emerged from the writings of Bourdieu frames this investigation and introduces detraditionalisation both as a methodology of this study, and a relevant aspect of the spatial and symbolic unplanning of the patriarchal dwelling. This essay also illuminates women's spatial agency and valuable design contribution that has the potential to expand beyond canonical architectural and design histories. Because these spatial alterations are both subtle and commonly disregarded, ethnographic methods were implemented in this study, including semi-structured interviews and photographs taken inside Italian domestic interiors designed in the post-war era. This essay addresses only a small portion of a decade-long study spanning Italy and France, with dozens of interiors studied and inhabitants interviewed. Given the scope of this text, priority will be given to one relevant case study, the modernist towers built in Viale Etiopia, Rome, by Mario Ridolfi and Wolfgang Frankl (1955). This project exemplifies the evident detachment between architects' planned spaces and inhabitants' small acts of unplanning, which is even more apparent in Italy's traditional cultural context, where modernity, however imposed (during fascism) or advertised (through the media in the post-war period), was never fully assimilated.[14]

traditionalisation

The nineteenth-century process of national and cultural unification of Italy took place through the consolidation of its culinary culture and the homogenisation of social classes, along with the construction of a national character based on strong gender hierarchies and the cornerstone of Italian identity: the Catholic, nuclear family.[15] Confined in their domestic role, women have not only been the guardians of Italy's food culture in its intimate and popularised form — at the origins of the constructed myth of Italy's peasant cuisine — but they have also been able to express themselves through the decoration of their homes.[16] The process of construction of Italian women's self-identity within these constraining conditions qualifies this research. It is important to note that the social changes relevant to this analysis occurred between the 1960s and 1970s, when middle-class women began entering the labour market en masse. Despite the extra-domestic occupation, Italian women were expected to carry out their unpaid housework. Sociologist and politician Laura Balbo theorised the 'double presence' that, still today, 'indicates a working condition, continuous intertwining between work and domestic needs, a disposition to act and think in a transversal way with respect to the different worlds.'[17] This means women continued performing their caring role on top of being employed elsewhere, 'which is institutionalised beyond the family (state welfare, education, labour market) and impacts upon household organisation.'[18] Double presence, then, on the one hand demonstrates the emergence of a new social order that moves beyond the modernist paradigm of the separate spheres and, on the other hand, acknowledges the persistence of dynamics of subjugation and control in women's lives. Nevertheless, this circumstance allowed women to rethink their traditional roles and carve out space for personal development. Historian Lucetta Scaraffia indeed clarifies that:

> an élite of women has begun to give voice, both in public and in private, to self-reflection. They have begun to build in the first person, at least in part, their own social image. This work of redefining one's own identity starts from the very roots of the perception of reality.[19]

As anticipated, stereotyped versions of femininity and masculinity persisted in Italy even after the trauma of the Fascist regime and the World Wars. Historian Enrica Asquer clarifies that, from the post-war period onwards, within Italian families existed an 'intertwining of ambivalent and painful feelings, which nailed many Italian women to domesticity.'[20] Specifically, men 'were all a bit torn, because they had come out for centuries of total supremacy, so they did not dare to say "you stay at home!", but that was what they wanted.'[21] Notably, the changes caused by Italian women joining the labour force were at the root of a widespread sense of nostalgia for traditional society that was seen as a more coherent and stable world.[22] This nostalgia characterises the middle-class conservatism of the generation of homeowners (born after the end of World War II) that inhabit housing complexes such as the one designed by Ridolfi and Frankl in Viale Etiopia.

The neo-traditionalist turn in Italian politics confirms the slow consolidation of traditional gender and family relations across Italian society, which clearly affects domesticity and the design of middle-class dwellings.[23] Italian women continued to pay the cost of Italy's social involution, as most of them had not been able to break away from their traditional domestic role. They had, therefore, no other choice than to rework traditional roles, spaces, and practices to affirm themselves and their individuality. The current skyrocketing rates of domestic violence in Italy could be explained by the reactionary, traditionalist pull of Italian heteropatriarchal society and women's constant negotiation of their social position vis-à-vis social change and conservatism, torn between adherence to the secure horizon of tradition and their personal aspirations.[24]

These are precisely the circumstances described by Atkins, as women's presence and contributions to the public and political spheres had been prompting that reflexivity at the basis of detraditionalisation. The institutionalisation of 'double presence' guarantees

a continuation of women's traditional role, yet it opens to new spaces for self-reflection, hence subtle change and the consequent unplanning of the spatial structures that confine them. However, it is precisely the persistence of patriarchal order and social expectations towards women's domestic duties that characterise their subtle reactions. However relevant to this study, these initiatives are commonly disregarded by architecture and design historians. This is explained by design historian Penny Sparke, who argues that the aesthetic canon of the dominant culture is masculine; consequently, women's tastes and aesthetic choices have been stereotypically branded as 'trivial' or, worse, 'kitsch' [Fig. 01].[25] Aesthetic judgement and value attribution in architecture and design was, and still is, tied to a masculine experience of modernity that has pushed women's design contributions to the margins of architectural and design history. As a result, women's spatial and aesthetic choices have been overlooked by historians until recently, and women have been systematically excluded from the dominant aesthetic culture.[26] As Bourdieu explains, this privilege has been justified by the judgement of taste, whose criteria are defined precisely by the élite white men who enforced distinction and defined the boundaries of high culture.[27]

Sparke describes women's overlooked interior design contribution to domestic interiors as 'conservative modernism.'[28] According to her, the latter was promoted through the media and it became 'embedded as an ideal across class lines in interwar society' even if it 'resembled that of Victorian society nearly a century earlier.'[29] Most importantly, conservative modernism led to a 'resistance to the model of modernity that women were being asked to negotiate' so, '[i]nevitably, the bulk of their work resided somewhere in the middle, blending modernist ideals with those of feminine domesticity.'[30] This is precisely how detraditionalisation unfolds and how the patriarchal dwelling is gradually unplanned; a version of modernist living is imposed and proposed as the aesthetic and spatial canon, and women's deviation from these precepts is disregarded and denigrated. Their choice of rejecting the modernist minimalist aesthetic because of the negotiation of their modern identity leads to an overt preference for a more nostalgic taste in interior decoration [Fig. 01]. Moreover, each of their proposed deviations from intended uses and functions gradually reconfigures the order imposed in these interiors, contributing to its symbolic unplanning.[31]



Figure 01.
Post-war Interiors, Rome (Italy), 2019. Photograph: Francesca Forlini, 2019.

In this regard, anthropologist Daniel Miller explained that women's household activities do not prevent self-actualisation, and the emergence of conservative aesthetic trends in the domestic realm does not necessarily entail a passive reproduction of traditional family hierarchies and, to put in Bourdieu's terms, habitus.[32] However, it is precisely through the reworking of traditional structures that it is possible to rethink gender and self-identities and, above all, dismantle the patriarchal order intertwined with the planned domestic interior.[33] Women's negotiated face of modernity could be understood once again through the lenses of Adkins's theory, as femininity encompasses an 'ambiguity at the heart of gender and sexuality reproduction' and so could be simultaneously reactionary and revolutionary; it is also characterised by an effort in producing 'comfort (via home, estrangement, boundary maintenance) or ontological security to overcome the ambivalence that beats the heart of being human.'[34]

Architect Mario Ridolfi and Wolfgang Frankl's Modernist housing project in Rome (1955) is a particularly interesting case study as it exemplifies the dynamics introduced in this essay. The residential estate, visited during fieldwork, was considered by many a successful project, as the architect perfected some of the architectural solutions experimented in previous housing complexes, including the multiplication of dwelling typologies, more generous interior spaces, shared green areas, and refined decorations on each facade [Figs. 02 and 03]. The eight rectangular towers (nine–ten floors) represent a significant example of Italy's post-war reconstruction efforts, though targeted to the middle class. The towers granted a high population density while enabling a proper lighting of the generous collective spaces [Fig. 02].[35]



Figure 02.
Towers in Viale Etiopia, Mario Ridolfi and Wolfgang Frankl arch. Rome (1949–55). Photograph: Francesca Forlini, 2019.

The door that separates the dwellings' living room, or salotto in Italian, from the kitchen is considered a particularly important symbolic and physical threshold that encapsulates the mechanisms described so far. Faithful to the modernist separate spheres principles, the former is indeed the representative, public portion of the dwelling (associated with the masculine portion of the interior), while the latter is, as elsewhere in the world, the quintessential feminine space in the home. Figure 03, specifically, shows how the original layout (on the left) is completely altered in the apartment on the right, materialising the symbolic unplanning that has only been described in theory until now. The dividing wall in question is, indeed, a

> mental boundary that has preserved the salotto up to now. It was preserved for guests but also for the inhabitants, for that need to feel part of a wider social dimension, identified in the "moral theatricality" of bourgeois decor. The latter has been able to preserve itself since the daily disorder, the needs of the body, intimacy, had a place to express themselves.[36]

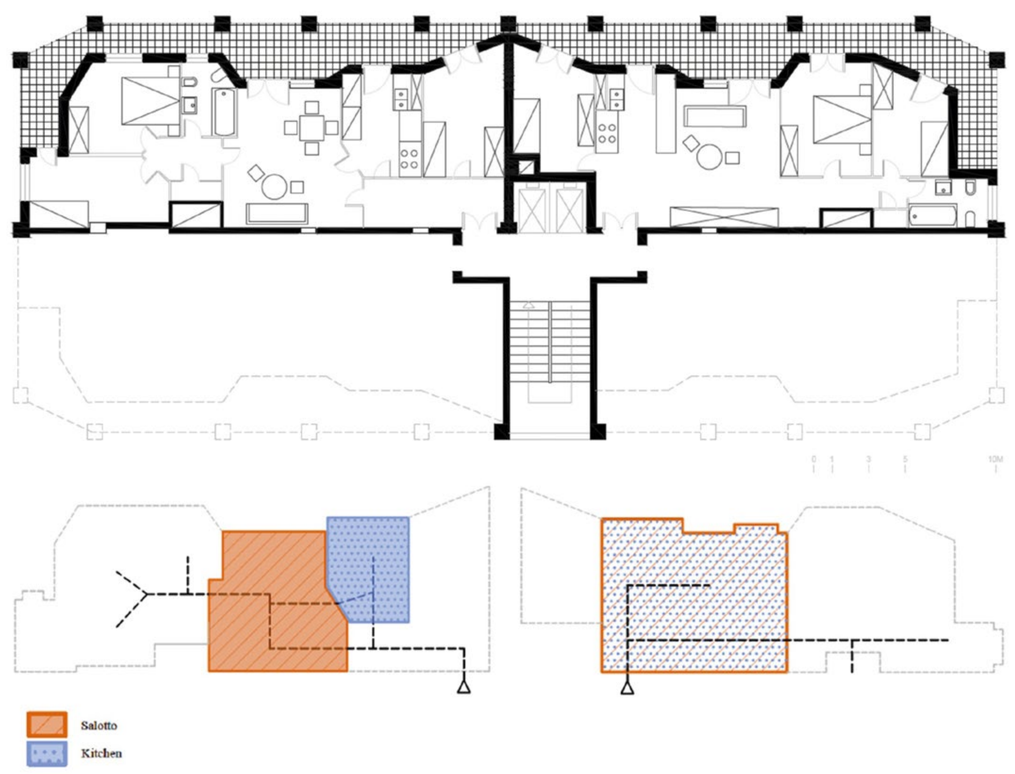


Figure 03.
Plan and distribution diagram of Mario Ridolfi and Wolfgang Frankl's Towers in Viale Etiopia, Rome (1949–55).

Once again, these mental and symbolic boundaries coincide with the Italian separation of gendered spheres in the home. The *salotto* — qualified by the central symbol of the patriarchal family, the *ricorrenze* table (table for recurring events) — is as untouchable and unreachable as if it is the head of the family [Fig. 04].[37] The room is devoted to the representation of the social class and status of the family, which coincides with the social position and occupation of the husband and father. In other words, the use of the *salotto* remains limited to important events. It is characterised by a large

table for the *ricorrenze* positioned in its centre, often under a large chandelier, representing the heteropatriarchal, Catholic family and the centrality of Italy's culinary traditions. The arrangement of this piece of furniture is associated with reunited patriarchal families during meals, which has not only relevant cultural and religious meanings, but also strengthens gender and interpersonal hierarchies within the family.[38] The order that regulates the plan and arrangement of people and objects in space is symbolic, since it is based on the image to be projected to the outside world, which coincides with class conventions and structured interpersonal relations.[39] The centrality of traditional symbols and spaces such as the *salotto* and *ricorrenze* table, however, also makes them key sites for resistance and change, unplanning, and detraditionalisation.



Figure 04.
Ricorrenze table inside an apartment in Ridolfi and Frankl's Towers in Viale Etiopia. Photograph: Francesca Forlini, 2019.

detraditionalisation

Italy's projects of construction and consolidation of a national, middle-class identity based on the centrality of both food and the patriarchal family had repercussions on the distribution of modern dwellings.[40] The most important aspects of this process were the establishment of a cultural narrative that formed disciplined citizens, the consolidation of a normalised social class with a clear identity, and the strengthening of gender hierarchies, all spatialised in the kitchen and *salotto* throughout the twentieth century.[41] As food preparation and consumption gained a central role in this process, grandmothers became the embodiment of Italian food culture, the true custodians of genuine Italian tradition (which, as Piero Meldini has proved in his work, is as fictitious a cultural construct as the alleged inferiority of women).[42] Surprisingly, though, it is precisely within the arena of culinary culture that new social change is emerging today. Indeed, women have been rethinking their positions towards housework, including food preparation.[43] Tellingly, some women developed a rejection of cooking as 'the refusal of food camouflages that of the kitchen, the home, marriage, motherhood and, in short, the traditional role of women'.[44] In essence, they reacted in different ways to the oppressive system that kept forcing them into stereotyped roles, rethinking both the architectural space, enculturated domestic practices, and consumption choices.

Adkins' social theory opens up, once again, to women's reaction to backward roles and oppressive systems in late modernity.[45] She argues that the movement of women into the labour market and the subsequent 'feminization of public spheres of action' led to 'a critical reflexivity on the part of men and women via-à-vis gender norms to a detraditionalization of those norms'.[46] This is a particularly sensitive aspect of her theory, as it introduces social change within existing structures, specifically a 'reworking of the social categories of gender', problematising the gender spheres paradigm and influencing gendered practices.[47]

But Adkins' point can indeed extend to women at large, as the detraditionalisation of gender leads to substantial changes in both habitus and space (which she refers to as 'field') — that is, in both social and domestic behaviour. Given the centrality and symbolism of the *salotto* and kitchen in the Italian home — alongside the objects contained — their design and disposition determined the position of women within the architectural plan. It is the wall that divided the kitchen from the *salotto*, its presence or absence determining the relationship between habitus and field inside the Italian home, and it is precisely in the complex interplay between practices and spaces, social models and negotiated identities that a possibility for change in Italian society has emerged.

One inhabitant of Ridolfi's project [Fig. 03, apartment on the left, and Fig. 04] clearly explained the contrast between the representational *salotto* and the kitchen: 'everything took place inside the kitchen. In that small table that you see under the window, which widens, we ate in 5–6, tightly, when we had such a space [the *salotto*] that could not be touched!'[48] Another woman interviewed states that when their family used the *ricorrenze* table [Fig. 04], '[we used it] during our Christmas gatherings, during holidays, my father's birthday. When was his last birthday? It was in January, and we had dinner here. I moved this sofa, and we all had dinner here. [...] This was the space for parties even when I was a child, my mom used to organise parties here with canapés, sweets. It was always here in this room.'[49] The interviewee later added, 'While with my mother and the whole family we all tended to eat tightly in the kitchen, I changed this habit — I can't stay there, it's always hot — and so we always eat here [*ricorrenze* table].'[50] This subtle change could be compared to the gradual marginalisation of the *ricorrenze* table and its movement from the centre of the *salotto* towards the perimeter walls [Figs. 04 and 05]; in both cases, its symbolic role as centre of the heteropatriarchal family decreases without disappearing.

Socio-spatial change in Italy has been slowly emerging from women's gradual break from traditional habitus and field of action (the domestic one), which, according to Bourdieu, is at the basis of transforming practices.[51] Adkins recognises how this connection of social transformations to a heightened awareness and critical reflexivity emerges precisely 'when there is discord between the previously routine adjustments of subjective and objective structures'; so habitus and field are asynchronous, because the field of action changes — in this specific case, from the domestic to the public sphere.[52] This misalignment, or disconnection, alongside reflexive self-actualisation and the subsequent material, spatial change, are precisely the ingredients that make possible the physical and symbolic unplanning of the oppressive, symbolic power of the modernist, heteronormative, and patriarchal dwelling.

Sociologist Steph Lawler adds a further level of analysis to these dynamics, which questions the nature of resistance and domination by arguing that 'there is no "innocent" position: no resistance that is not in some way complicitous with power.'[53] She also refers to an important passage by Bourdieu: 'Resistance may be alienating, and submission may be liberating. Such is the paradox of the dominated, and there is no way out of it.'[54] Lawler partially agrees with Bourdieu and, provocatively, asks 'how liberating is it to cast off these marks of difference and to adopt a normalised (middle-class) habitus?' Women's design practices in the home seem to play out precisely at the intersection between resistance and domination, but 'there is a clear difference between individual forms of accommodation and resistance, and the overthrowing of systems of domination', meaning that it is possible to operate individual forms of resistance while remaining confined within systems of domination.[55] Adkins attributes change to an alteration in the structures of social reproduction.[56] Namely, the so-called detraditionalisation of gender emerges from a new reflexive approach towards gender norms and the internal distribution of modernist and sexist

separate spheres. Therefore, it is embedded within pre-existing systems of oppressions, stereotypical gender roles, and, as discussed, cultural constructs as well. To her, reflexivity must be distinguished from a liberal notion of freedom that emphasises the critical questioning or deconstruction of the normative frameworks governing gender and is, instead, 'linked to a reworking or refashioning of gender [...] [it] is perhaps better conceived as a habit of gender in late modernity.'[57] Her point clarifies women's constant push and pull between habitus, traditional roles, and the will to change, which coincides with the enhancement of one's individuality and selfhood. Much of this process takes place through nuanced spatial interventions and clear aesthetic choices, which make women active design agents and protagonists in the construction of their own (reflective) narratives of the self.

All in all, the Italian kitchen and the wall that divides it from the living room materialise the misalignment between women's subjectivities and the architectural space, with its physical demolition symbolising the change that is at the basis of detraditionalisation and the unplanning of the modernist dwelling. The inhabitants interviewed during fieldwork showed a propensity to respect past values, traditions, and existing spatial distributions. On certain occasions, they also demonstrated a will to break free from constricting spaces and rules. The decrease in the female presence at home has brought, for instance, some men closer to the kitchen.[58] Both women's lives outside the domestic sphere and their intimate and domestic practices have contributed to the consolidation of their inner selves, which is the outcome of not only interpersonal exchange but also a reflexive attitude towards their position in the social world and the family nucleus. It is widely acknowledged, however, that in today's dual-earner households an unequal division of domestic work persists, with a noticeable absence of Italian men in caring and emotional labour.[59]

Few Italian men have developed an interest in food preparation in Italy, and two men interviewed during fieldwork demonstrated an interest in cooking that materialised in an interest in renovating their home. They are homeowners who recently inherited their childhood homes inside Ridolfi's housing complex [Figs. 02 and 03]. The interventions consist of the demolition of the dividing wall and the creation of an open plan kitchen [Fig. 03]. The owner of the apartment on the right in Figure 03 completed the renovation of his apartment, with an open plan living area that is rather radical in comparison to his neighbours' and, overall, all the apartments visited during fieldwork. What stands out is the complete absence of a dining table; both the kitchen and ricorrenze table are replaced by a large island. When asked the reasons behind these changes, he replied:

> [It is due to] the need to have the space as open as possible. It is not dictated by fashion, I think it is a need rooted in us, a new generation that needs a little more space of conviviality. I don't like the closed kitchen. This is because the centre of the house has actually become the [open plan] kitchen. [...] Now the centre of the home and of conviviality is the kitchen. So having the island, for example, and this fact of being close, chatting, drinking, and cooking, is something you couldn't do before. Because you were closed in the kitchen, or everyone went into the kitchen — but it was narrow — so maybe this is the reason behind this need for openness.[60]

The second homeowner shared with me some renderings of the renovation plan he intends to carry out inside his apartment [Fig. 03, left, and Figs. 04 and 05]. The interventions consist of the demolition of the kitchen-*salotto* dividing wall, the creation of an island, just like the previous apartment, and the persistence of a *ricorrenze* table and a large, heavy wooden display cabinet that was inherited and conserved in time currently located right in front of the same table [Figs. 04 and 05].



Figure 05.
Renderings of interior renovations inside an apartment in Ridolfi and Frankl's Towers in Viale Etiopia. Illustration: Alessandro Franzini, 2019.

His answer to my question on the reasons behind this renovation was particularly meaningful:

> I knock[ed] this wall down because otherwise you won't spend time in this salotto. If I stay in the kitchen cooking, the others are not suffering the heat with me, they are over there [in the salotto] conversing. So you end up here alone, at best with someone who keeps you company, who maybe feels sorry for you [...]. Things change substantially if I tear the wall down, it becomes a true living space, usable, where you can really do everything you want, where there is no longer the problem that one feels isolated from the world [...]. And then the three doors that separate the salotto from the kitchen [...]. The fundamental factor is that the things have changed: it is no longer the same as before, when the woman was in the kitchen and stayed there.[61]

The consciousness of the gendered nature of the practice, and the identification of a spatial problem, are crucial as part of a reflexive process of identity formation that, although still too rarely, overrides stereotypical notions of gender and gendered practices. In fact, it is precisely when the man starts preparing meals that he realises the oppressive nature of domestic space. The embodied act, the gendered habitus, by changing its field of action generates change, and this change invests both female and male identities. It is no wonder these mechanisms take place in the kitchen and are therefore characterised by the changing dynamics of food preparation and consumption. Important processes of detraditionalisation are slowly taking place inside Italian domestic interiors; however, it is worth underlining that spatial change must always relate to social change and, therefore, that the position of women vis-à-vis gender relations, habitus, and self-making should be equal, otherwise — as Adkins rightly pointed out in her writing — detraditionalisation is likely to be followed by a re-traditionalisation.

It is undeniable that these first manifestations of change in the domestic sphere, even in a country as conservative as Italy, are encouraging. However, gender equality in the domestic sphere remains to be achieved. Despite women's entry into the workforce over the past century, they are still expected to take care of the house, leading to tensions within the family unit.[62] The remnants of these dynamics are evident in the interviewees' answers and materially deposited inside contemporary domestic interiors. As discussed, although men are taking on more domestic responsibilities, it is still not enough; on the contrary, they benefit from women's hyperproductivity and use their free time to strengthen extra-domestic, professional, and personal relationships (even within their homes).

conclusion

Double presence remains a fundamental component of Western women's lives and identities. Despite the contemporary blurring of the modernist public–private dichotomy in the home, women remain the centre of domestic life and caring. The gradual detraditionalisation process has led only to partial unplanning of the modernist dwelling.

Italian women became custodians of Italian domestic and culinary culture — that is, both the symbolic and spatial centre of Italian culture and home — and have learned to create room for emancipation

through the reproduction of traditional practices. Even while employed (hence experiencing a double presence), they have managed to make small spatial adjustments and modifications aimed at decentralising patriarchal power in the home. Given the oppressive, heteropatriarchal, and architectural framework that historically trapped women in the domestic sphere, the home became the ground of resistance that in turn shaped their self-identities. In other words, it is precisely within the objective frameworks — those of national culture, patriarchy, social class, economic systems, and the spatial organisation of the home — which shaped women's lived experiences and confined them within familiar stereotypes, that they nevertheless discovered avenues for self-expression. Women's spatial cultures and the constant unplanning and redesign of the domestic space are indeed based on the reworking of institutional frameworks that are often traditional or, alternatively, patriarchal and normative.

The term 'traditional' resonates with the key concepts of 'detraditionalisation' and 'retraditionalisation' advanced in this essay, which explain this process of negotiating personal and gender identities within oppressive, outdated, backward-looking, conservative, stereotypical models. The emergence of nuanced patterns of resistance, of original cultural, aesthetic, spatial interpretations and modifications, even if small and apparently insignificant, became valuable manifestations of women's spatial design practices and aesthetics in the domestic sphere. Despite the recent contribution of men to the same processes, the subordination of women in all domestic aspects unfortunately remains, but hints of socio-spatial change and the physical and symbolic unmaking of patriarchal boundaries in the Italian home create space for hope.

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author biography

Francesca Romana Forlini, PhD, is an architectural historian and theorist, educator, and editor. Her scholarship applies feminist theories to uncover overlooked architectural and design histories. She is a Fulbrighter and an alumna of the Royal College of Art and Harvard Graduate School of Design.

notes

1 See the writings of Beverly Skeggs, Lisa Adkins, Judy Attfield, Penny Sparke, Mary Douglas, Sarah Elsie Baker, Irene Cieraad, and Alison Clarke, among others.

2 Jane Randell, Barbara Penner, and Ian Borden, *Gender Space Architecture: An Interdisciplinary Introduction* (Routledge, 2000), p. 104. Moreover, an important source on the spatial division of gendered sphere and its relationship with domestic practices is Pierre Bourdieu's text on the Kabyle House, 'The Berber House or the World Reversed,' *Social Science Information,* 9.2 (April 1970), pp. 151–170.

3 Randell, Penner, and Borden, *Gender Space Architecture*, p. 104.

4 Penny Sparke, A*s Long as It's Pink: The Sexual Politics of Taste* (Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art & Design, 2010).

5 Detraditionalisation is explored by Lisa Adkins and Beverly Skeggs in their book *Feminism After Bourdieu* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2005).

6 Adkins and Skeggs, *Feminism After Bourdieu*. Skeggs and Atkins critically address the theory of Pierre Bourdieu, focusing on the mechanisms of formation and negotiation of the self. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Harvard University Press, 1984).

7 Mark Wigley, 'The Housing of Gender' in *Sexuality & Space*, ed. by Beatriz Colomina and Jennifer Bloomer (Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), p. 340.

8 Wigley, 'The Housing of Gender', p. 340.

9 Wigley, 'The Housing of Gender', p. 331.

10 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*.

11 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*.

12 Adkins and Skeggs, *Feminism after Bourdieu*.

13 Adkins and Skeggs, *Feminism after Bourdieu*. Notably, Adkins expands on the idea of detraditionalisation previously introduced by Anthony Giddens, Paul Heelas, and Scott Lash, among others.

14 Francesca R. Forlini, 'Salotto Buono: The "Art of Conservation" and the Permanence of an Italian Room', *Interiors*, 11.2–3 (2021), pp. 157–182, doi.org/10.1080/20419112.2021.1942616. See also Francesca R. Forlini, 'The House I'd Like to Have: Women's Spatial Cultures, Design, and Aesthetic in 20th Century Italy', *Interiority*, 7 (2024), pp. 41–60, doi.org/10.7454/in.v7i1.359.

15 Forlini, 'Salotto Buono'; Forlini, 'The House I'd Like to Have.'

16 Forlini, 'Salotto Buono'; Forlini, 'The House I'd Like to Have.'

17 Lorenza Zanuso, 'Studies on the Double Presence', in *La Ricerca delle Donne*, ed. by Maria Marcuzzo and Anna Rossi-Doria (Rosenberg & Seller, 1987), pp. 41–58 (p. 43) (author's translation).

18 Beverly Skeggs, 'Context and Background: Pierre Bourdieu's Analysis of Class, Gender and Sexuality', in *Feminism after Bourdieu*, pp. 19–33 (p. 22).

19 Lucetta Scaraffia, 'Essere Uomo. Essere Donna', in *La Famiglia Italiana dall'Ottocento a Oggi*, ed. by Piero Melograni (Laterza, 1988), pp. 193–258 (p. 251) (author's translation). See also E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Doubleday, 1956).

20 Enrica Asquer, *Storia Intima Dei Ceti Medi: Una Capitale e Una Periferia Nell'Italia Del Miracolo Economico* (Laterza, 2011), p. 172.

21 Asquer, *Storia Intima Dei Ceti Medi*, p. 172.

22 Scaraffia, 'Essere Uomo. Essere Donna', p. 250.

23 Andrea Donà, 'The Rise of the Radical Right in Italy: The Case of Fratelli d'Italia', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 27.5 (2022), pp. 775–794, doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2022.2113216.

24 Both Asquer and Scaraffia hint at these dynamics. Although Asquer's book was published in 2011, her reflections can apply to the current situation.

25 Regarding this matter, and in line with this text, Judy Attfield states: 'I want to argue that kitsch is a valid category of popular taste, that it conveys a pleasurable, aesthetic genuine experience, that it applies to many types of objects not necessarily those normally categorised as art; but can also apply to design and everyday things and that as such, it has political implications in making culture accessible. Positioning kitsch within a social context of popular taste recognizes popular culture as a more inclusive field of inquiry, it acknowledges the aestheticization of everyday life as a positive aspect of culture and allows the consideration of taste as part of the habitus, the material culture of everyday life.' Judy Attfield, 'Redefining Kitsch: The Politics of Design', *Home Cultures*, 3 (2006), pp. 201–12 (p. 207), doi.org/10.2752/174063106779090758.

26 Sparke, *As Long as It's Pink*.

27 Bourdieu, *Distinction*.

28 Sparke, *As Long as It's Pink*, p. XXIII.

29 Sparke, *As Long as It's Pink*, p. 98.

30 Sparke, *As Long as It's Pink*, p. 99.

31 This is particularly clear in the renowned case of Le Corbusier's Pessac housing complex, also known as Cité Frugès (1926). Only five years after its construction, the residential complex was appropriated by the inhabitants and visibly altered. They not only occupied the interior spaces with old-style furnishings and decorations, but also modified the architectural layout by adding pitched roofs over the roof-garden. For further information on this project see Philippe Boudon, *Lived-In Architecture: Le Corbusier's Pessac Revisited* (MIT Press, 1972).

32 Daniel Miller, 'Appropriating the State on the Council Estate', *Man*, 23.2 (1988), pp. 353–372, doi.org/10.2307/2802810.

33 Miller, 'Appropriating the State', pp. 353–372.

34 Skeggs, 'Context and Background', p. 29.

35 The presence of this room clarifies the social status of the inhabitants who were meant to occupy these buildings.

36 Asquer, *Storia Intima Dei Ceti Medi*, p. 44 (author's translation).

37 Forlini, 'Salotto Buono.' See also Maristella Casciato, 'L'Abitazione e gli Spazi Domestici' in La Famiglia Italiana Dall'Ottocento a Oggi, ed. by Piero Melograni (Laterza, 1988), pp. 525–588. In the same volume see also Pietro Meldini, 'A Tavola e in Cucina', pp. 417–464. Lastly, this topic is approached by Filippo De Pieri, Bruno Bonomo, Caramellino Gaia, and Zanfi Federico, *Storie Di Case: Abitare l'Italia del Boom* (Donzelli, 2014).

38 Forlini, 'Salotto Buono'; Meldini, 'A Tavola e in Cucina.'

39 Forlini, 'Salotto Buono'; Meldini, 'A Tavola e in Cucina.'

40 Forlini, 'Salotto Buono'; Meldini, 'A Tavola e in Cucina.' See also Giorgio Di Giorgio, *L'Alloggio ai Tempi dell'edilizia Sociale: dall'INA-Casa ai PEEP* (EdilStampa, 2011).

41 Forlini, 'Salotto Buono'; Meldini, 'A Tavola e in Cucina.'

42 Meldini, 'A Tavola e in Cucina.'

43 Meldini, 'A Tavola e in Cucina', p. 453.

44 Meldini, 'A Tavola e in Cucina', p. 453 (author's translation).

45 Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford University Press, 1990); Adkins and Skeggs, *Feminism after Bourdieu*.

46 Lisa Adkins, 'Introduction', in *Feminism after Bourdieu*, pp. 1–18 (p. 9).

47 Adkins, 'Introduction', p. 9.

48 Interview with a resident, Ridolfi's towers in Viale Etiopia, Rome, August 2019 (author's translation).

49 Interview with a resident (2019).

50 Interview with a resident (2019).

51 Adkins, 'Reflexivity: Freedom or Habit of Gender?' in *Feminism After Bourdieu*, pp. 196–198.

52 Adkins, 'Reflexivity', p. 196.

53 Steph Lawler, 'Rules of Engagement: Habitus, Power and Resistance', in *Feminism After Bourdieu*, pp. 110–128 (p. 122).

54 Steph Lawler, 'Rules of Engagement', p. 121.

55 Steph Lawler, 'Rules of Engagement', p. 121.

56 Steph Lawler, 'Rules of Engagement', p. 122.

57 Steph Lawler, 'Rules of Engagement', p. 122.

58 Laura Balbo, 'La doppia presenza' ('The Double Presence'), *Inchiesta*, 8.32 (1978), pp. 3–6; Irene Cieraad, '"Out of my kitchen!" Architecture, gender and domestic efficiency', *The Journal of Architecture*, 7 (2002), pp. 263–279, doi.org/10.1080/13602360210155456.

59 See Asquer, *Storia Intima dei Ceti Medi*.

60 Interview with a resident (2019).

61 Interview with a resident (2019).

62 Gabriella Oppedisano, '"Donna casalinga" e "uomo con i pantaloni", gli stereotipi resistono fra gli adolescenti', Il Sole 24 Ore, 21 April 2021 <https://alleyoop.ilsole24ore.com/2021/04/21/donna-casalinga-uomo-con-i-pantaloni-stereotipi-resistono-fra-adolescenti/> [accessed 29 October 2023].

scaffold/ing: a relational architectural concept

Zuzana Kovar
zuzana&nicholas architects, Griffith University
0000-0002-6807-3519

abstract

This essay develops the idea of the scaffold/ing in conjunction with an expanded notion of Julia Kristeva's abjection. Based on concepts developed in the book *Architecture in Abjection: Bodies, Spaces and Their Relations* (2017), it explores notions of bodies and spaces as assemblages and vibrating fields of matter. Dissolving their perceived boundaries, we stop identifying bodies and spaces as objects or things, and instead understand them for the vulnerable and unplanned constructions they are. It is within this realm of vulnerable constructions that the scaffold as a potential conceptual support structure emerges. The physical scaffold has always supported vulnerable architectural constructions through their erection, renovation, and maintenance works. Here, the scaffold is considered for how it may also be deployed as a flexible and perpetually shifting support for fields of matter.

Drawing on Céline Condorelli's *Support Structures* (2009), I propose the scaffold as an architectural concept, describing the temporal structure or network of connections of processes in bodies. Scaffolds tentatively hold all bodies together, be they human bodies, spatial bodies, or animal bodies, while they are continually undergoing construction and deconstruction. Further, the scaffold is considered as a temporal structure of processes that is inextricably woven into a body, rather than sitting to the outside and being a fixed erected structure in a traditional sense. As this idea of the scaffold is porous and not definitive, matter is able to pass in and out through the process of abjection, and it is abjection that reorganises material compositions.

To illustrate the workings of the scaffold/ing, I discuss the gradual development and shifting of my house and studio in Brisbane. Here written anecdotes, architectural drawings, histories, constructions, and lives lived compound into a vibrating material field.

keywords

scaffold; abjection; assemblage; matter; ecologies

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introduction

> I have never been capable of building a house, an authentic house. My idea of a house is a complex machine, in which something goes wrong every day [...] Drawers stick, carpets tear, as does the upholstery on the living-room couch [...] There's more: water drips from the ceiling (the neighbour's pipes have broken, the roof leaks, the waterproofing is loose). And the gutters are full of grey leaves, dry or rotting. [...] petals fall and armies of ants swarm over your door sills [...] The granite walls and floors are covered with dangerous slime [...] there is mould in closets and drawers, cockroaches withstand pesticides [...] Dust gets into the top of pages, tiny insects chew on them [...] drops of water from nearby vases with wilting flowers drip on the etchings, sprinkle paintings in a furious process of destruction.[1]

In 1994, the architect Álvaro Siza wrote an anecdote titled 'Living a House'.[2] He begins this anecdote by differentiating his work — the design and construction of houses — from what he terms an 'authentic' house, which he has never been able to realise, and which he sees as a complex machine.[3] For me, this anecdote is significant in the context of the idea of the unplanned interior for two reasons. First, it is significant for its acknowledgement of a clear limit to the architect's work of designing and planning, which subsequently gives way to what we might term the unplanned and unideal life lived of the house. Second (and perhaps more importantly), it brings to the fore the life lived of the house, its numerous processes, matters, and multispecies relations, that constitute a vibrating architectural or interior ecology. All buildings and their interiors, I would argue, participate in such ecologies, whether their matter movements and relations are immediately perceptible, or occur over slower timescales. All buildings are therefore unplanned and unideal to a degree as much as they might simultaneously be planned and idealised.

However, to label a building or space of any type as planned or unplanned, ideal or unideal is not productive, and risks both a dualistic and subjective compartmentalisation. For this reason, I prefer to reframe space as a vibrant temporal assemblage narrated by multiple divergent authors, be that the valorised human designer or occupant, or the various subjugated biotic and abiotic systems beyond our control. This thinking is not new, and draws on numerous threads, from Deleuze and Guattari, to Donna Haraway, Peg Rawes, Hélène Frichot, and Maria Puig de la Bellacasa among others.[4] Each of these thinkers acknowledges our more-than-human world and the ethical imperative to reorganise the human–nonhuman relations through their overlapping ideas. As a way of flexibly and temporally framing these assemblages, I develop the idea of the scaffold/ing in this essay, in conjunction with an expanded notion of Julia Kristeva's abjection, which I discuss in my book *Architecture in Abjection: Bodies, Spaces and Their Relations*.[5] As an architectural concept, scaffold/ing helps us to understand the vulnerable, porous, and perpetually shifting network of connections between bodies, spaces, and matter.

To illustrate the workings of the scaffold/ing, I utilise the qualitative research method of autoethnography, and discuss the gradual development and shifting of my house and studio in Brisbane, which operates as scaffolding (noun), i.e., as heterogeneous components that constitute a scaffold; and as a scaffold (noun and verb), i.e., a tentative structure that provides support to a never-finished body/assemblage.[6]

scaffolded abject bodies

In 1980, the Bulgarian–French philosopher Julia Kristeva published *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: Essai sur l'abjection*, translated into English in 1982 as *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*.[7] The book examined the breakdown of the discrete and idealised nature of bodies through the abject and its associated process of abjection, which serves to dilute the boundary between the subject and object or self and other. The leaky body was shown to repeatedly contaminate

both itself and any other body or space within its immediate vicinity.[8] While for Kristeva such events elicit horror as a human reaction, in much the same way Siza's spatial events perhaps elicit disgust and inconvenience, they simultaneously describe volatile material processes.

Viewed through the lens of process philosophy, such as that of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, these material, bodily, and spatial processes begin to overlap, forming complex and dynamic relations. In this context, as I have previously written, architecture (inclusive of the interior), 'comes to be understood as composed of a range of processes that occur at various scales of perceptibility – an assemblage of processes, existing not in isolation, but interconnected with further processes outside itself.'[9] To adopt an assemblage of processes as our understanding of architecture or the interior is to learn to work with, rather than against, the unplanned and unideal. It is to immerse ourselves in messy relations and to stay, as Donna Haraway would say, with the trouble.[10] It is within this realm of vulnerable constructions that the scaffold, as a potential support structure, emerges.

Drawing on artist Céline Condorelli's *Support Structures*, within which she discusses the workings of the scaffold, I see the scaffold not merely in its traditional sense as a support structure, but as a potential architectural concept describing the temporal structure or network of connections of processes in bodies, which allow 'for all that has been broken down to matter to be built up again, only this time, in a perpetually shifting and unfinished way.'[11] Scaffolds tentatively hold all bodies together, be they human bodies, spatial bodies, animal bodies, while they are continually undergoing construction and deconstruction. The scaffold, as a temporal support of processes, is inextricably woven into a body, rather than sitting outside and being a fixed, erected structure in a traditional sense, as I note in my book:

> As [...] a scaffold is not definitive, matter is able to pass in and out, maintaining hence a certain open-endedness and heterogeneity. [...] a scaffold is extremely porous, [...] it functions akin to a sieve, with a mesh constructed of an intricate network of connections serving to filter matter. [And] to speak about matter passing in and out, is to speak about abject(ion). Abject(ion) is the process by which matter moves in and out of the scaffold, [it is that which serves] to reorganise compositions. Abject(ion) can therefore be thought of as not only bodily or spatial expulsions — that is, as matter adding itself to or leaving bodies — but in terms of bodies entering and leaving assemblages. This shifting of matter, then, is what constitutes a body or an assemblage at a particular point in time.[12]

As a support structure, a key quality of the scaffold is its uncomfortable proximity. Whether a scaffold sits to the outside as in a traditional building context, functioning as a temporary structure that enables construction or repair, or is a more permanent scaffold within our body as in tissue engineering, it becomes entangled with what it is supporting. Condorelli writes, 'Support's first operational feature is its proximity. No support can take place outside a close encounter, getting entangled in a situation and becoming implicated in it.'[13] To support is, therefore, to become implicated in matter movements and in the messy moments of transition, which again not only echoes Haraway's thinking, but Hélène Frichot's dirty theory — a theory that contaminates thoughts and practices and catalyses profound relationships with our environment-worlds.[14] To this theory, we might add the scaffold, as it is 'bound up with the muck of mundane relations on the ground' and participates 'in the imagining of new modes of getting messy together, accepting what Donna Haraway calls our messmates: our more-than-human relations.'[15] It demands, as per Frichot's dirty theory, 'that we listen to the environment-worlds in the midst of which we lose and find ourselves, becoming and unbecoming.'[16] It is with an understanding of the scaffold, both in its traditional sense as well as this expanded definition, through which I will discuss my house and studio [Fig. 01].

an impermanent and volatile typology

My partner and I purchased our house in 2011. The house is a Queenslander — a typology that was first introduced in Brisbane in the late 1800s, consisting of a simple timber frame, clad in boards and elevated on timber stumps, with an iron roof and verandah/s. Built sometime between the 1890s and 1905, the house was originally a four-room worker's cottage, with a kitchen accessed via a rear verandah, and with a full verandah at the front. It is located on a prominent street corner — on grade at the front and elevated a full storey at the rear — a typical condition in Brisbane's hilly inner-city suburbs.

One of the qualities of this typology, is the grid of timber stumps on which the houses are positioned, allowing for a negotiation of a range of topographies and enhanced cooling in warmer months. The grid of stumps, which can range in height from a few centimetres to a precarious balancing act of several metres (dependent on the location), supports the house above, and in doing so, assumes the role of a semi-permanent scaffold. The scaffold is semi-permanent in the sense that the stumps remain once the house is completed, albeit sinking and shifting over time, resulting in the insertion of timber and asbestos wedges between bearers and stumps, given the typically non-existent connection between the two. The house therefore has an ability to move. It can change position on the site in either the x, y, or z axis; it can change the materiality of its scaffold, from timber, to concrete, to steel, or change sites altogether. The Queenslander sits perched on its scaffold waiting in anticipation for a potential move. It is a scaffolded body, perpetually in crisis with no stable state in sight, questioning the assumed permanence of buildings [Fig. 02].

A second enduring quality of this typology is its seasonal swelling and shrinking of all the timber work, and its porosity at a material level. Although unplanned but inherent, this movement and porosity marks seasons and weather changes, immersing the houses' occupants in ecological



Figure 01.
House front and rear elevations, 2011. Photograph: Zuzana Kovar.



Figure 02.
House propped for renovation works, 2022. Photograph: Zuzana Kovar.

cycles. Australian author David Malouf has written poetically about his own childhood home in this way, recalling its volatile body:

> A complex assembly: of organs, nerve-ends, bones, cartilage, muscle. An experience machine, that observes, thinks, smells, attends, touches. It learns to listen in this forest for the creaking of familiar boards that is the approach of this or that sharer of the house, and as the day's heat ebbs and the old house-frame resettles, marks the distance we have moved into night. It gets cramps and growing-pains; it sweats, stinks, grumbles; but at certain intangible contacts, it soars till it might be angelic gifted with unique, undeniable powers – of flight, of change, of eternal instant being. It is always in a state of becoming.[17]

Twenty-five years later, architectural academic Cathy Smith added human processes to the mix, discussing her children's bodily fluids leaking through gaps between floorboards, in her made and remade cottage: 'the space became one of colicky vomit dripping onto shoulders and floors, seeking out the cracks between the tongues of the floorboards and returning to the damp clay below.'[18] Coupled with the cottage's own material processes, 'the wall-becoming-fence, partially made of broomsticks, dissolv[ing] gradually into the earth with bacterial assistance', messy relations begin to form an assemblage within which the matter exchanged between human and spatial bodies results in a physical indiscernibility.[19] Not only is there no longer a distinction between body and space / subject and object, but the distinction between the planned and unplanned similarly dissolves into a teeming material assemblage. All these matter movements are then loosely tied together by a shifting scaffold that allows one to understand the assemblage as a particular architecture at any one time.

This morning, for example, our house and studio is composed of tea tree mulch carried in on the underside of paws; hair accumulating around the dog bed; dog saliva drying on the concrete slab; ants moving inside along the base of the stair wall; dust accruing on window sills from the adjacent construction site; geckoes hiding behind the books; flies looking for scraps of food; bees becoming trapped behind large panes of glass; along with my partner and I working and travelling up and down the stairs — carrying dog hair and mulch up, and fruit and water down. These are merely a few of the matter movements currently visible. After school, the assemblage will shift dramatically as the kids return home.

the worker's cottage

Upon purchase, our house already possessed both the above qualities (of the semi-permanent scaffold and material porosity), to which we have since contributed. Throughout our occupation, the house has been literally scaffolded two times — once to replace the roof sheeting and once to reclad the northern wall [Fig. 03]. The house has further had concrete formwork/shuttering (which may be thought of as a type of scaffolding) setup on several occasions. Some was done by us during our earlier renovations, such as the shower base, garden steps, and plinths, and others more recently by a builder [Fig. 04].



Figure 03.
Roof scaffold and wall scaffold. Photograph: Zuzana Kovar, 2011; 2022.

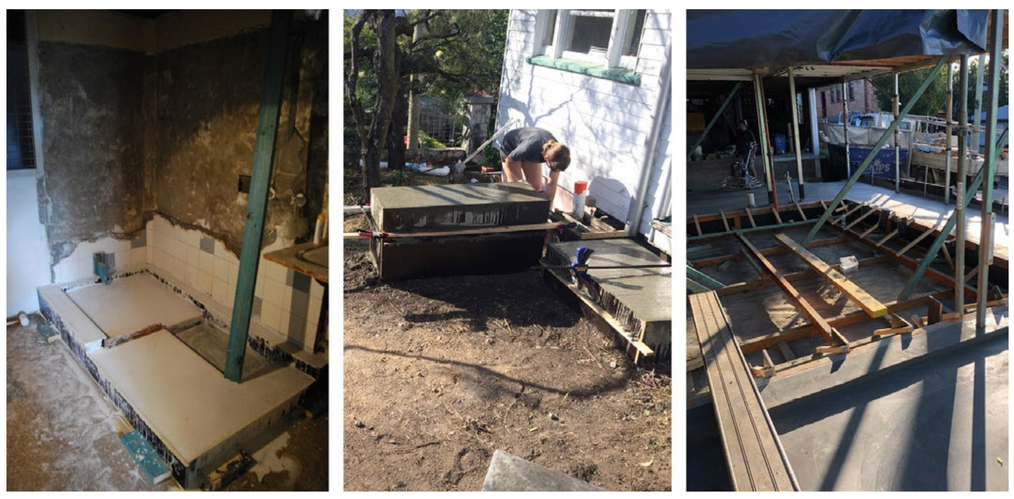


Figure 04.
Shower, garden plinths, slabs, and upturn formwork. Photograph: Zuzana Kovar, 2011; 2014; 2022.

Curiously, although the bones of the cottage are timber and tin, the house has a long history of scaffolded concrete and terrazzo work from a previous stonemason owner. Terrazzo splashbacks, benchtops, and a tabletop in the kitchen; terrazzo tiles, copings and concrete balustrade panels on the deck; various terrazzo copings in the undercroft; and terrazzo floors, shower tray, and walls in the bathroom [Fig. 05]. The understorey consisted of a concrete terrain, and external slabs, steps, and planter retaining walls, and cast sewer ventilation objects populated the garden [Fig. 06]. Not to mention the upper level of the cottage, of which approximately a third was covered by concrete slabs concealed beneath worn linoleum [Fig. 07].



Figure 05.
Terrazzo splashback, deck, balustrade, edging, floors, and shower tray. Photograph: Zuzana Kovar, 2011.



Figure 06.
Concrete understorey. Photograph: Zuzana Kovar, 2011.

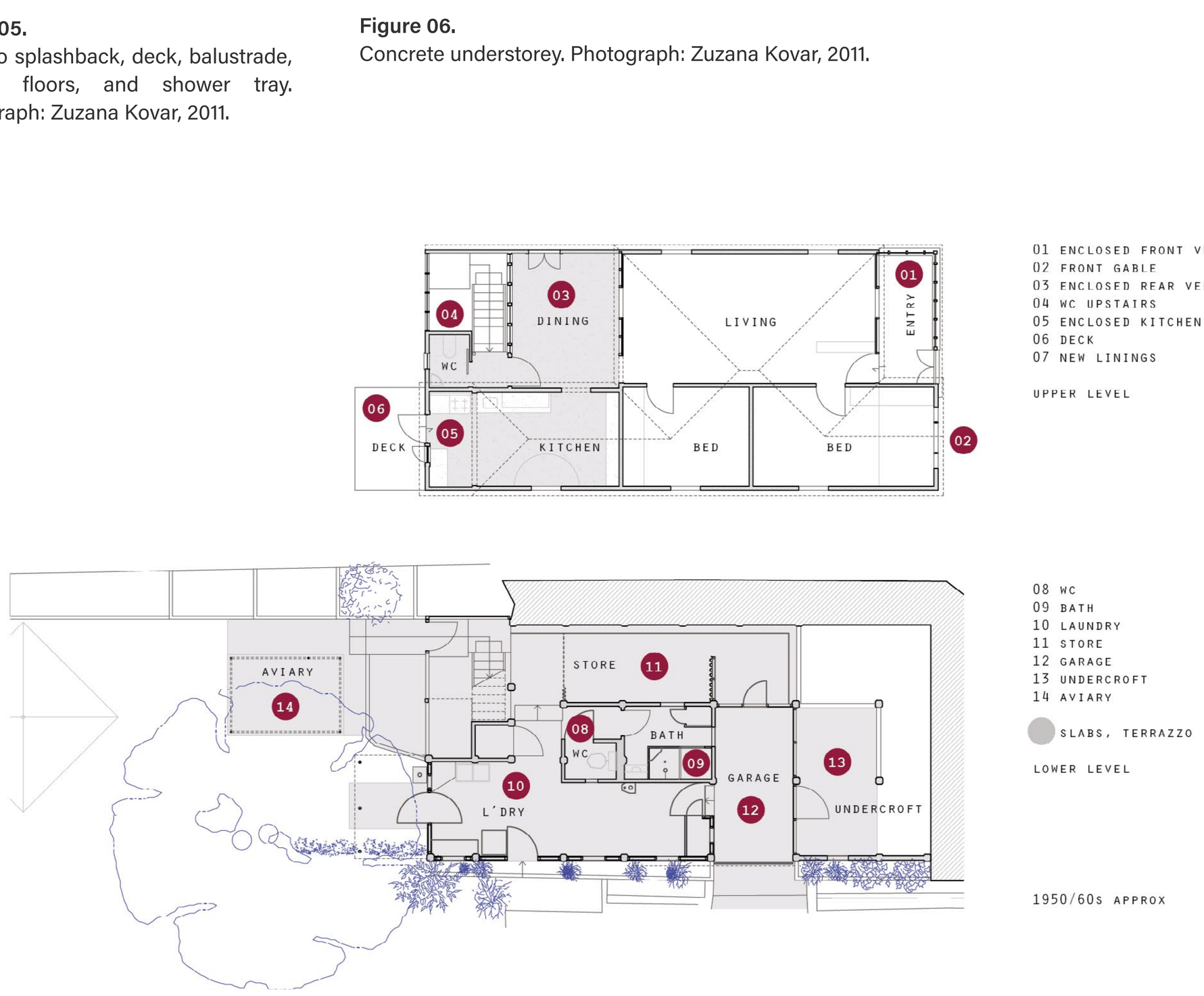


Figure 07.
House modifications 1950/60s. Grey showing extent of concrete and terrazzo. Drawing: Zuzana Kovar.

The upper level presented a curious situation of the house as permanent formwork or scaffold. The existing timber flooring, floor, and wall structure provided support both as formwork during the laying of the slab and then continued to provide support for the weight of the concrete until its removal in 2022. Upon the removal of the inbuilt kitchen joinery (also used as formwork), a cross-section revealed a multitude of layers akin to an archaeological site, comprising the original pine boards, linoleum, concrete of varying thickness, and another layer of linoleum. From underneath, the effect of the timber structure as permanent formwork was evident, through bowed bearers, sheared joists, and inserted timber wedges [Fig. 08]. The role of the stonemason as a body within the ever-shifting assemblage that is the house is significant, both in rendering the house a permanent scaffold and in physically reconfiguring it, such that very little of the original fabric was left upon our purchase.



Figure 08.
House as permanent formwork: elevated slabs, concrete and linoleum layers, timber wedge. Photograph: Zuzana Kovar, 2012.

In addition to the stonemason, the presence of a group of other bodies — termites — was evident throughout portions of the house. Although long gone when we arrived, the volume of material removed from the house significantly altered and expanded the assemblage through its connection with a neighbouring termite mound [Fig. 09]. These material shifts, along with endless others, whether immediately perceptible or evident over an extended period, foreground the temporal and makeshift nature of the house and its various occupants. Here, the assemblage is narrated (and continues to be narrated) by divergent multispecies authors, and the tentative and porous scaffold flexes to accommodate the volatile assemblage.



Figure 09.
Termite damage to cladding and structure. Photograph: Zuzana Kovar, 2014; 2022.

Similar to Malouf's and Smith's observations, I have been cataloguing material processes or the shifting of matter that constitutes a body or an assemblage at a particular point in time since 2011, through what I call 'Written Matter'. These short anecdotes speak directly to the impermanent and volatile nature of buildings and interiors. They require that

one make time to observe a diversity of timelines and move at the pace of ecological relations, which Maria Puig de la Bellacasa defines as key aspects of care and engagement with more-than-human relations.[20] Echoing Bellacasa, Haraway discusses the need for deep listening to and immersion in the matters and species that teem within, through, and around us.[21] In this sense, 'Written Matter' is an attempt at an immersion in and documentation of assemblages beyond the traditional tools of the designer — the architectural drawing synonymous with the architect's decisions, and the photograph depicting an idealised building. The drawings and photographs, of course, also exist for our house; however, they become a part of, rather than the sole description of, the vibrant architectural ecology:

> Our worker's cottage has a porous body. All such cottages do. In the rainy season its undercroft masonry swells with ground water — a consistent layer of dew forming on the surfaces. At certain times, the numerous crevices around openings above invite the water in. But this porosity only ever lasts several minutes. — December 2014
>
> After only a few years, the polyurethane on the window has begun to peel off like sunburnt skin, swaying in the breeze. — November 2021
>
> The grain of the plywood walls attracts dust, over time building up a layer that rivals the thickness of the substrate. — November 2023
>
> A seedling sprouted in the shower drain. I contemplated leaving it to see it grow — to shower with it every day. But I pulled it out, thinking that I needed to clean the drain, and immediately was disappointed that I did so. — December 2023
>
> The bare bulbs incite a commotion of various insects in the warmer months. Come morning, they are always all gone, and only the moth prints remain — delicate, dusty deposits cataloguing the journey of the night before. — August 2024

architecture supports occupation

The final idea I would like to introduce is that architecture inclusive of the interior supports occupation, and that therefore by its very nature, architecture may be understood as scaffolding life. To explore the idea of architecture scaffolding life / supporting multispecies occupation, I will unpack key shifts from the year of purchase to the present, with aid of several plans.

Following purchase, the house was occupied in its current state, with minor modifications, which were largely about making the house habitable, through the stripping of moisture-damaged linings and a very basic and raw renovation of the semi-external bathroom [Fig. 10]. Here, much of the work that was installed by the stonemason, and that once supported occupation, was removed from the assemblage — a vast shifting of matter, stripping the house back to its bones. The work was undertaken by us, and therefore gradual — a process through which we began to learn about the house's idiosyncrasies, and through which we partially assimilated with the matter in the now opened downstairs floor and wall cavities — dust, droppings, and dead critters [Fig. 11]. This was the start of the messy relations between us and our house, and the start of what Haraway calls an interspecies intimacy, which makes clear that we have never been individuals.[22]

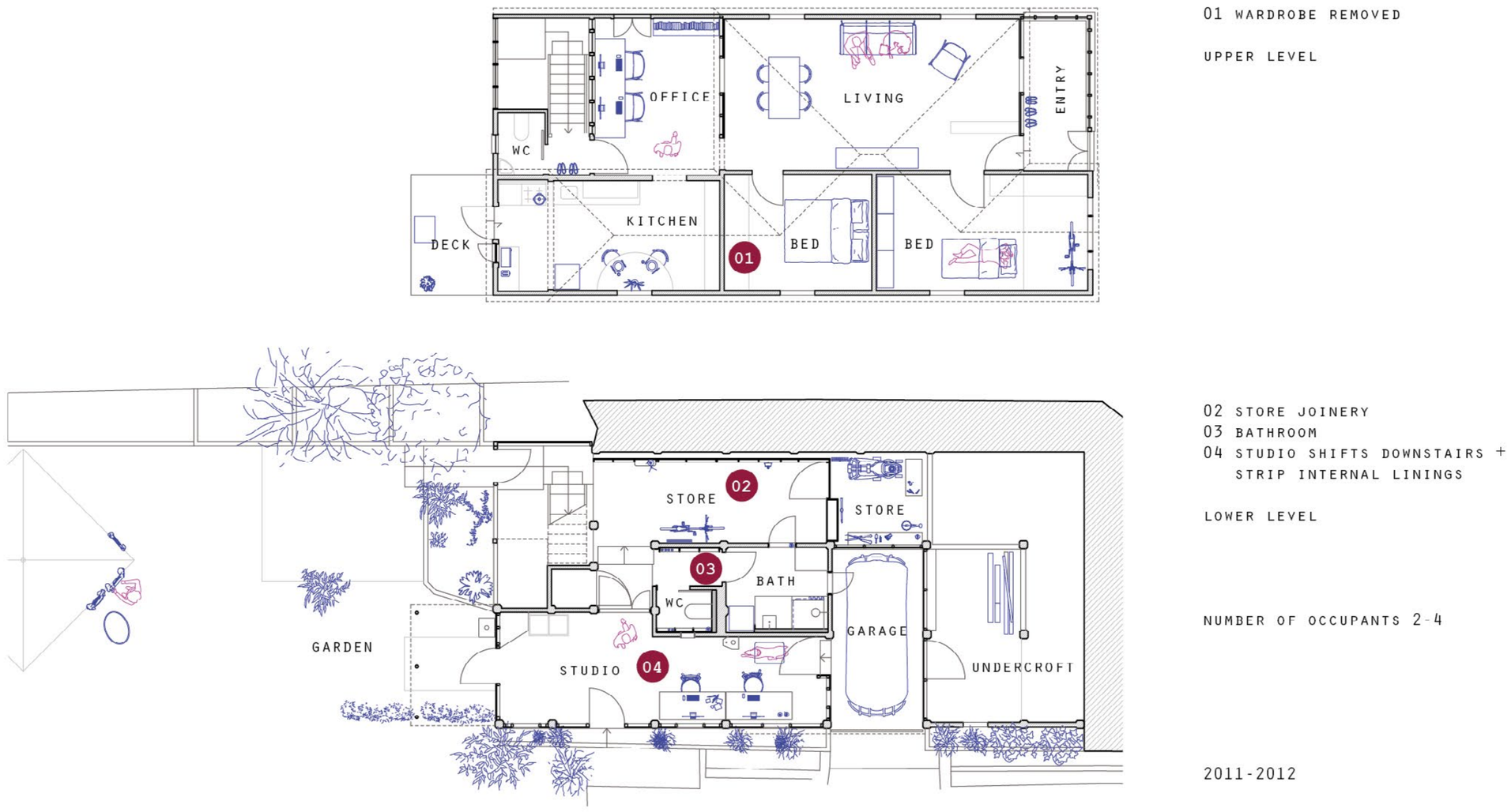


Figure 10.
House modifications 2011–2012. Drawing: Zuzana Kovar.



Figure 11.
Demolition material and detritus, 2011. Photograph: Zuzana Kovar.

The assemblage that is the house, of course, shifts with matter movement at a range of scales, and one of the perpetual shifts is the number of occupants the house has supported at various points in its life, both short-term, such as an acquaintance coming over for tea, a possum hurrying across the roof, or a gecko sitting by a bare bulb, and long term. In 2011, the house supported two bodies (my partner and I, along with various transient critters); in 2012, the assemblage grew to accommodate a friend and a dog. This resulted in a programmatic shift, with a once-empty room used for storage becoming a bedroom, and an old laundry in the undercroft becoming an impromptu studio. The house, in our initial years of ownership, was makeshift, responding to various factors as they emerged. It gradually changed room functions, material composition, inhabitant types, and numbers, as it was renovated room by room. The worker's cottage typology easily accommodated these programmatic changes, through its flexible framework of simple, similarly sized, and interchangeable rooms — some of which existed and some of which needed to be reinstated.

The above programmatic shifts are easily traced across the plans. Functions that were service heavy, the kitchen and bathroom, moved only once, while others were a lot more transient, such as our work studio, moving from the enclosed deck, to the undercroft



Figure 12.
House modifications 2013–2015. Drawing: Zuzana Kovar.

laundry, to the front bedroom, to the temporary studio, to the old kitchen, to finally the renovated undercroft where it is now — a room that was labelled as a bedroom for bank metrics and that may in the future serve as a living room. While some of these shifts were planned, others were unexpected and reactionary. There were no drawings, merely conversations, material quantity calculations, and negotiations with the cottage. Upstairs, a key planned change was the flipping of the bedrooms with the public spaces, to locate these on the more desired northern elevation. This was achieved via cutting openings into walls to join once separate rooms together in an enfilade configuration [Fig. 12]. Boards used from one of these openings became the tabletop for the studio — fabric once part of a wall, now supporting our design and production of new architecture.

For us there is an interesting relationship between the work done on the house by the stonemason and the work done on the house by ourselves. In both instances, the work is completed as a series of small projects, slowly accreting to a whole with a specific identity — concrete and terrazzo in the case of the stonemason, and timber in our case. Coming to the realisation that very little of the original fabric was left (only the pine floor and a total of four walls, one of which suffered from termite damage to the timber boards, such that the boards which once supported the horsehair plaster installed around the 1950s/60s, hung for dear life onto the plaster now as support), the approach was therefore taken to work with the materiality and language of the original cottage, without recreating it. Although subconscious at the time, each project on the house was conceived of in the same way — as a piece of joinery — revealing a pattern or way of working that spans from the making of a window to the making of a room. And it is joinery that perhaps even more directly supports occupation.

The studio was the first of these joinery pieces. Located in the undercroft, following the stripping

of the space back to the slab and concrete stumps, all three walls that contained the studio were made as standalone pieces, comprising of timber frames with exposed studs and rebated edges to accept shutters, glass, and a tiled datum [Fig. 13]. Designed for a loose fit, the walls struck a clean line at 2200 mm, allowing for a brass spacer to easily negotiate the irregularities of the hundred-year-old structure. As a result of this detail, the studio did not seal, with numerous gaps above the 2200 mm datum. It opened itself to, and participated in, both material exchanges and ecological cycles — the studio was porous. In occupying the studio, we subjected ourselves to this volatile field of matter. There was a persistence to this matter. Each morning, before we began work, the tables had to be swept clean, and the pages of current work shaken out. But, even then, dandruff, grass seeds, and vehicular soot managed to accumulate on the table within a matter of hours, not to mention the tops of the new walls, which clearly replaced the removed ceiling cavity, as a path for geckoes and rats travelling to and from the neighbour's compost.



Figure 13.
Studio interior and brass spacer detail, 2013. Photograph: Toby Scott.

The bedrooms and hallway/walk-in-robe followed the completion of the studio [Fig. 14]. The division of the large southern room into two bedrooms and a hallway reinstated the original plan of the four-room cottage. Here the two bedrooms were conceived of as singular pieces of joinery, as intimate bed boxes. The joinery was sleeved within the existing shell of the house, striking a datum at the head of the windows and marking a clear distinction between joinery and existing wall. Walls, windows, shelves, and beds were made as one. With this project, the notion of joinery operates at a range of scales, from joinery as object, to joinery as room, rendering the distinction between the two ambiguous.

Beyond the plan arrangement, the joinery took two other cues from the original cottage: studwork was expressed akin to the single skinned walls, and the wall separating the bedrooms finished at the datum, creating an oversized breezeway. These choices reinstated a lack of acoustic privacy synonymous with a Queenslander, and what might perhaps be referred to as an inconvenience. Inbuilt inconveniences however provide a framework/ metaphorical scaffold for potential unplanned situations. And these situations can harbour intimate relationships between occupants, and a greater attunement to the world, which makes them a critical aspect of an ever-shifting architectural assemblage.

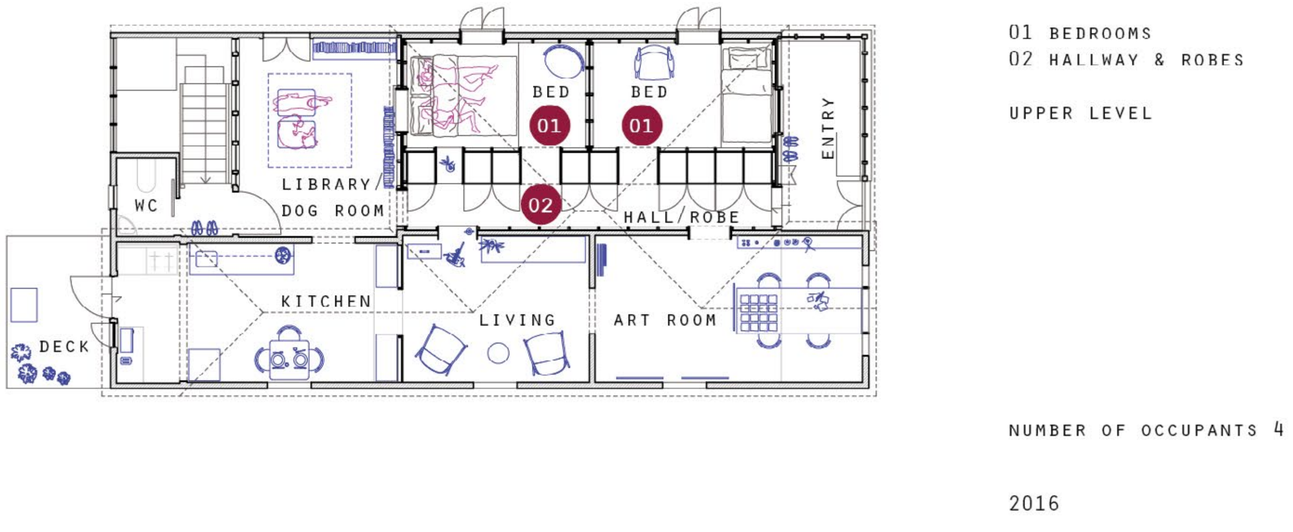


Figure 14.
House modifications 2016. Drawing: Zuzana Kovar.

Similar to the studio, the irregularities of the cottage were negotiated, this time with a skirt detail. Although upstairs was sealed better, geckoes and spiders still made use of the exposed top plates and cavities between studwork and plywood — we were unknowingly supporting and making kin with these species.[23] Functionally, the spaces remained relatively fixed, except for the hallway, which shifts from a public thoroughfare to a walk-in-robe twice a day [Fig. 15]. For the last six years, following the arrival of kids, this functionality has however become much more fluid, with the hallway having been a bowling alley and a race circuit (when connected to the enfilade), and the bedroom a theatre and a battlefield, among other things, evoking Bernard Tschumi's provocative spatial appropriations: pole vaulting in the chapel, bicycling in the laundromat, and sky diving in the elevator shaft.[24]

The living room marked our second project upstairs and mimics the bedrooms and hallway walk-in-robe [Figs. 16 and 17]. Here, in-built seats replace beds, but the details of making and the notion of joinery operating at a range of scales remain the same. For us, the now established and conscious way of working is both a reaction to the condition of, and the tectonic logic derived from, the existing cottage. This approach stems from an intimate understanding of the cottage and its idiosyncrasies, providing not only a conceptual framework but also a wealth of details to navigate the interface between old and new — details that can be applied to similar commissioned projects. But, despite this, each existing structure is unique and what is worked out on paper is always partially renegotiated with the building on site.



Figure 15.
Bedroom with oversized breezeway and hallway/walk-in-robe. Photograph: Zuzana Kovar, 2016.



Figure 17.
Living room exterior and interior. Photograph: Zuzana Kovar, 2017.

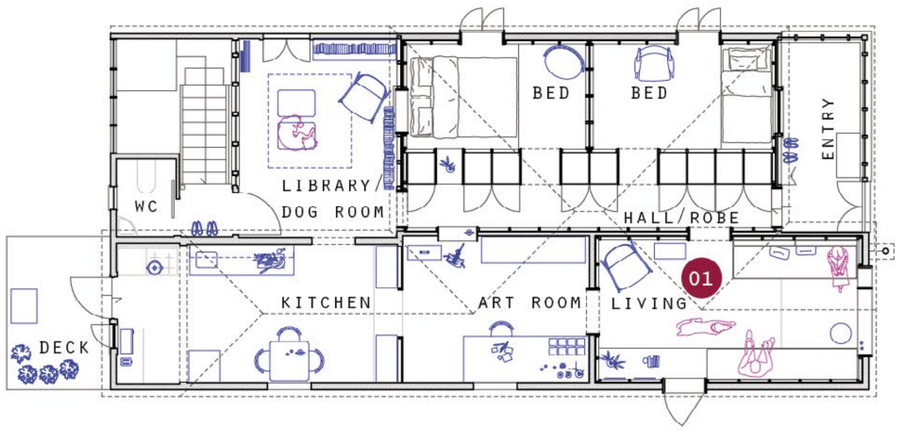


Figure 16.
House modifications 2017. Drawing: Zuzana Kovar.

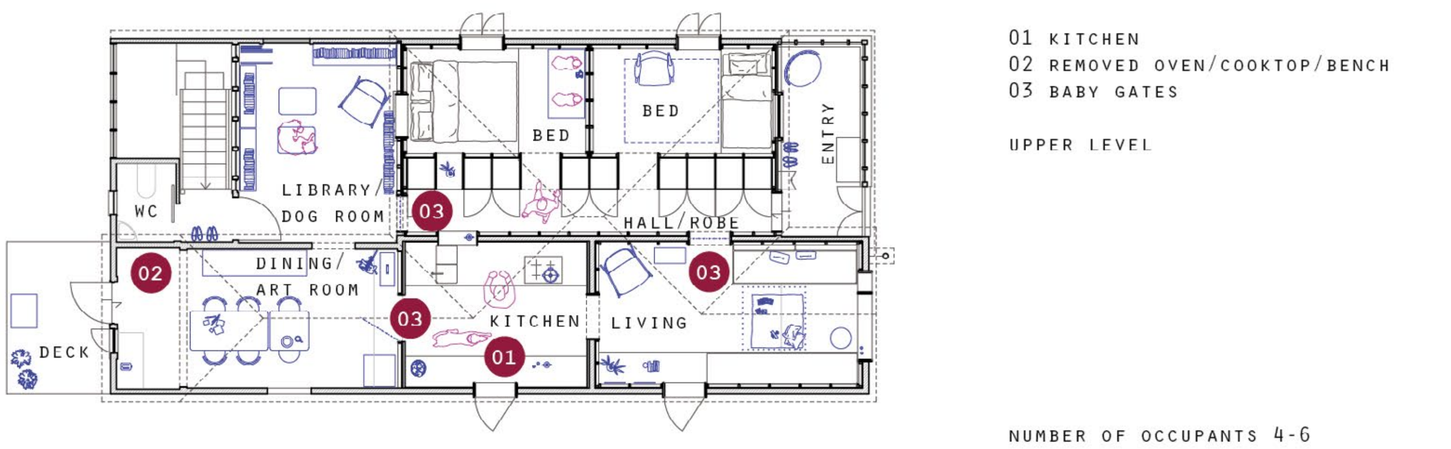


Figure 18.
House modifications 2018–2021. Drawing: Zuzana Kovar.

The shifting of the kitchen to the central room on the northern side was the last project before engaging a builder to complete more significant works to the rear and underneath of the cottage [Figs. 18 and 19]. The completion of the kitchen coincided with the birth of our twin boys, and a total of six bodies in the house (four human and two dog). This was a period of constant expulsion of abject matter, shifting of sleeping arrangements, and the installation of baby gates, which introduced once non-existent territories for the dogs and temporarily divided the house in two. Throughout the renovations and the early years of motherhood, I was constantly reminded of Haraway's observation that 'we are humus, not Homo, not antropos; we are compost, not posthuman'[25] and that all we do is participate in shifting matter from one place to another.

> The gaps between the woven paper coil on the first CH25 are gradually being filled by half-digested milk. While the arms of the second CH25 now carry the indentations of anxiety. — March 2020

The white painted walls reveal activity with glancing light from small hands, as do the leather seat cushions covered in stains and nail marks. There isn't a surface, horizontal or vertical, that has not been touched to a particular datum. — 2020

Every night water runs along the bathroom floor and pools at the base of one of the walls as a result of the toddler's splashing. On its route it picks up dust, dirt, hair, and sock fluff, only to deposit it in the ever-growing collection of detritus at the base of the wall. Apparently, I worry too much about these things. — August 2021



Figure 19.
Kitchen renovation in progress. Photograph: Zuzana Kovar, 2017.

In 2022, the upper rear of the house and the entire undercroft area underwent reworking [Fig. 20]. The stonemason's concrete topography, which was porous to moisture and never legal head height, was formalised with our own concrete topography, consisting of the practice studio, laundry, and garage [Fig. 21]. Upstairs was reconfigured, largely to house a bathroom and enclosed stairs to the lower level. Given the significance of Queenslanders and their protection through the 'Traditional Character Overlay', external walls, openings, and roof lines are to be retained, despite their often poor condition. If needing to be replaced, they must be like-for-like.

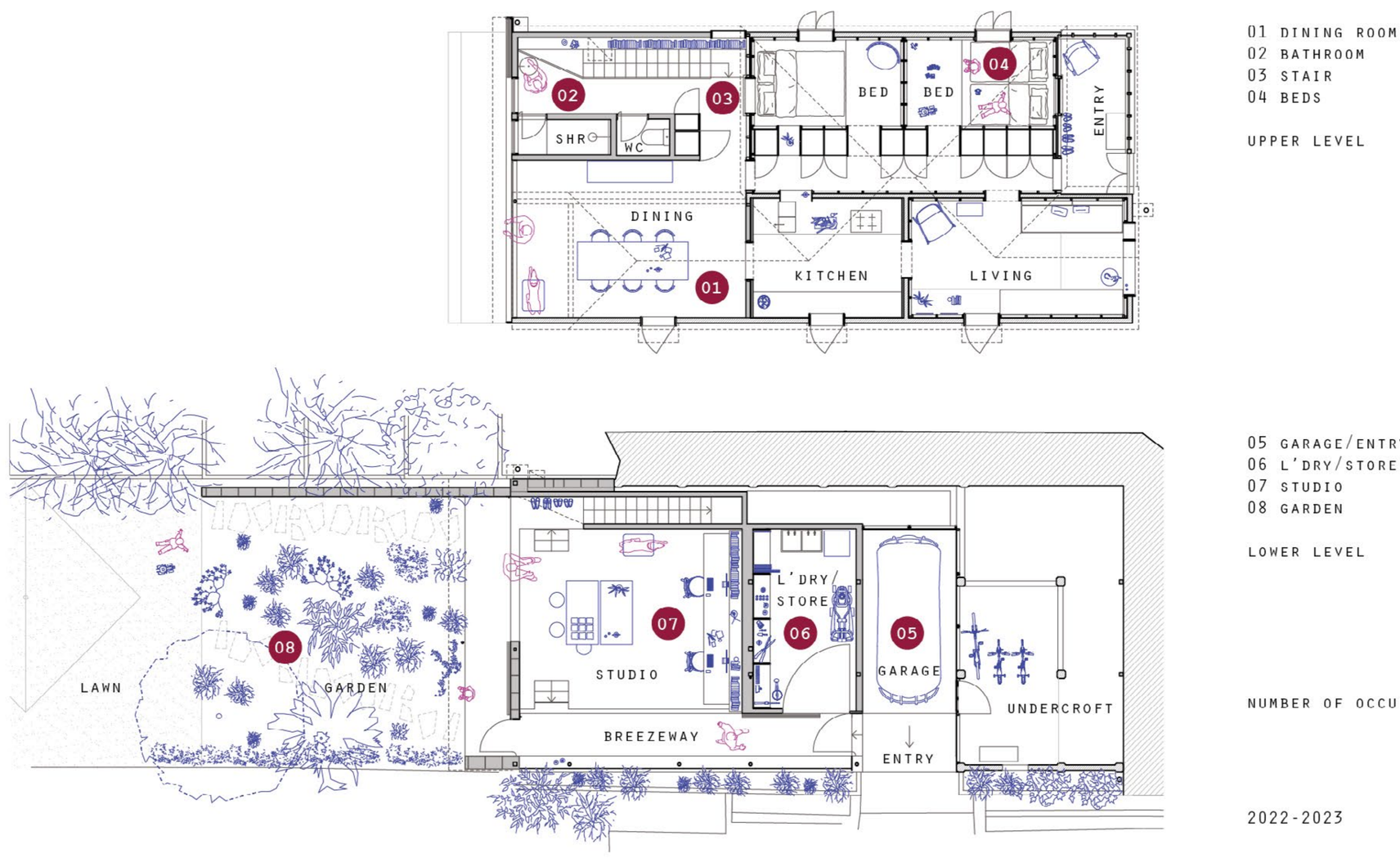


Figure 20.
House modifications 2022–2023. Drawing: Zuzana Kovar.



Figure 21.
Rear elevation and studio with a view to the breezeway and garden. Photograph: Zuzana Kovar, 2022.

The Character Overlay came into play at the rear of the cottage when renovating the roof and the prominent northern wall facing the side street. Although from the exterior these look original, they have been rebuilt; in fact, the whole rear of the house has been rebuilt out of structural necessity, made evident during construction. This presents an interesting dilemma, where the amount of original building fabric of these houses is often minimal, despite their original appearance. As a material assemblage, these houses shift significantly; however, as an architectural object, where our dependence on visual boundaries/categories prevails, they appear much more static.

The duration of the various assemblages I have discussed is of course ambiguous and may not be merely designated by a start and end date. Matter, whether perceptible or not, in the same or altered form, persists, such that the presence of an event or a body/ies linger long after their departure. For this reason, it is perhaps more accurate to collapse the last fourteen years of the house and understand this assemblage as something porous, indeterminate, and perpetually shifting — a drawing akin to Sarah Wigglesworth and Jeremy Till's dining table [Fig. 22].[26] The scaffold, which binds all these bodies and various matters together, will shift again tomorrow.



Figure 22.
House modifications 2011–2023 overlaid. Drawing: Zuzana Kovar.

We are surrounded by and take part in a multitude of processes that occur at various temporal scales. These processes are responsible for reorganising compositions via abjection or the shifting of matter, and creating temporary assemblages made up of various matters and multispecies engaged in becoming. Architecture is one such temporary assemblage. Although inroads have been made in considering architecture in this way, 'it' remains largely consumed as an object, authored by 'an' architect. Approaching architecture as an assemblage shifts the attention to architecture's processes, architecture's life lived, constituted by both the planned and unplanned, and further acknowledges authors of multiple species. Being attentive to ecological relations, learning to adapt, be flexible, and make kin, is a necessary shift in what Haraway calls, 'precarious times, in which the world is not finished and the sky has not fallen – yet.'[27] For me, the scaffold as an architectural concept assists with this reframing and way of working, providing an open and flexible support structure for material relations. My hope here is that the house and studio have provided a practical example of a scaffolded architectural ecology.

acknowledgements

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author biography

Zuzana Kovar is an architect and co-director of zuzana&nicholas architects. Zuzana has a PhD from RMIT, which was published as a monograph in 2017. Her research is interested in relations between bodies and spaces within the fields of architecture, ecology, philosophy, and art. She holds an adjunct lecturing position at Griffith University.

notes

1 Álvaro Siza, 'Living a House', in *Álvaro Siza: Private Houses 1954–2004*, ed. by Alessandra Cianchetta and Enrico Molteni (Skira, 2007), pp. 9–11 (p. 9).

2 Siza, 'Living a House', p. 9.

3 Siza, 'Living a House', p. 9.

4 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's thinking is generally applicable here, but of particular relevance is their idea of assemblage, which they discuss in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Robert Hurley, Helen R. Lane, and Mark Seem (Penguin, 2009) and *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (Continuum, 2004). For Donna Haraway, see *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016). For Peg Rawes, see *Relational Architectural Ecologies*: *Architecture, Nature, Subjectivity* (Routledge, 2013) in which she rethinks architecture as an ecology, composed of complex and dynamic relations. For Hélène Frichot, see *Dirty Theory: Troubling Architecture* (Spurbuchverlag, 2019). For Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, see *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), in which she discusses ecological ethics and temporalities of care in our more than human worlds

5 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (Columbia University Press, 1982); Zuzana Kovar, *Architecture in Abjection: Bodies, Spaces and Their Relations* (I.B. Tauris, 2018).

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8 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, pp. 3–4; 9; 27; 53; 65; 69; 108.

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10 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.

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14 Frichot, *Dirty Theory*, p. 11.

15 Frichot, *Dirty Theory*, p. 11; 12.

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21 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, pp. 58; 201.

22 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, pp. 67–68.

23 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, p. 103.

24 Bernard Tschumi, *The Manhattan Transcripts* (Academy Editions, 1994), p. 8.

25 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, p. 55.

26 Sarah Wigglesworth and Jeremy Till, 'The Everyday And Architecture', *AD*, 68.7–8, (1998), pp. 6–9; 31–35 (p. 8).

27 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, p. 55.

disgust, dread, and fear: tales of working with bio-based materials

John Stanislav Sadar
Department of Architectural and Industrial Design, Swinburne University of Technology
0000-0003-4791-9551

Gyungju Chyon
Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture, Monash University
0000-0002-1242-1043

abstract

Bio-based materials have increasingly been considered in the built environment as design professionals recognise the impact of industrial extraction on environmental degradation. These materials offer a promising alternative by promoting emergent growth, contributing to a bio-circular economy that emphasises biodegradability and reduced energy consumption, while offering the hope of less waste and healthier material choices for interior spaces. Furthermore, bio-based materials suggest a shift in designers' perspectives from an anthropocentric view to one that acknowledges the interconnectedness of living systems.

At the same time, the unplanned growth, decay and irregularities of bio-based materials not only challenge conventional aesthetics and expectations but can also evoke feelings of ickiness and apprehension.

This essay explores four projects with living materials — mycelium and moss — and the unplanned encounters that arose. One project explored hyphal growth in developing mycelium acoustic tiles and screens that highlighted mycelium's surface variations. Another project involved placing a couple of identical mycelium-composite stools outdoors in three locations in Victoria, Australia. Over several months, they underwent a significant transformation, altering in colour and texture and attracting various creatures, including snails and microbes. Yet another project involved purchasing moss online, which unexpectedly brought an entire ecosystem into our home, with unwanted fungi, worms, and moths emerging. A final project revealed dust appearing beneath mycelium objects previously displayed at a furniture store and an art gallery, now stored at the university. What we initially thought was sawdust turned out to be countless tiny insects which, to our horror, had eaten their way through the mycelium.

These unplanned experiences underscore the paradoxical nature of biomaterials and raise some fundamental questions about them: can their qualities of growth and change hope to overcome wider societal tendencies that favour permanence and stasis in interiors, and can designers transform their sense of unease and dread of decay into a sense of interconnectedness with natural processes?

keywords

biodesign; materiality; mycelium; moss; disgust

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introduction

> *In a dream, a dog appeared to me. It appeared to be in distress, with tangled, dirty fur, calling for help. When I reached out to run my fingers through her fur, a large patch of fur pulled off effortlessly with my hands. With horror, I saw mushrooms growing on the dog's skin. I felt compelled to pull them off the dog, and felt the resistance when I tugged them from the dog's skin...*
>
> *In another dream, I looked down on myself from above, so that I could see my own head. As I looked, I saw a cluster of mushrooms growing from my head, dense and white. Horror struck, I was powerless to do anything about it...*

These are the dreams one of the authors had while working on design projects using mycelium. This person woke with a feeling of intense disgust and ickiness from their powerlessness in the face of being invaded and colonised by fungi. These haunting dream sequences speak to a deep anxiety that emerges when working with mycelium — where are the spores? Are they in my home? Are they in my dog? Are they in me? This profound unease arises when materials spontaneously act of their own accord and refuse to behave according to the will of the designer or maker. The dream reveals what happens when the designed environment begins to grow, decay, and transform beyond our control, embodying the essence of concerns with *the unplanned* in interior spaces.

As interior designer Lucy Sutton points out in an article published by the Australian Institute of Architects, due to the continual churn of fit outs, interiors are a huge generator of waste and carbon emissions.[1] Although interior finishes and furnishings only account for 7–10 per cent of the embodied carbon footprint of a new build, the frequency of renovations that can occur as often as every five–seven years, means that over the sixty-year lifespan of a building, interior finishes and furnishings can surpass the carbon footprint of the building as a whole.[2]

In this context, bio-based materials offer the tantalising possibilities of bio-circularity. Their capacity to grow and change in relation to the wider environment can also mean their aesthetic qualities are emergent and unplanned, offering a radical departure from the stasis, control, and predictability of modernity and its palette of industrially manufactured materials. Yet for some, this very quality can also be unsettling. For example, mycelium can evoke a sense of uneasiness and dread on multiple fronts, having an unfamiliar texture, and uneven and dynamic colouration, and even tending to attract other lifeforms. Such feelings are further heightened by fungi's role in the ecosystem in relation to decomposition and decay vis-à-vis the modern project of cleanliness and control. Yet, we continue to learn that what we regarded as filth has a vital role in the ecosystem, and that mycelium is important in liberating nutrients to be used to enable new forms of life. Anthropologist Anna Tsing captures the dual nature — or bidirectionality — of fungi as both a destructive and creative force when she writes of fungi being on one hand 'feared in protecting wooden houses' and on the other hand 'the greatest gift to forest regeneration.'[3] This is echoed by William Ian Miller when he writes 'it is decay that seems to engender life.'[4] This unplanned nature and bidirectionality is an integral aspect of living material systems to be understood and integrated by designers as they look to obviate the environmental issues posed by interiors.

Bio-based materials are increasingly attractive for designers as they recognise the impacts of industrial extraction on environmental degradation. They offer promising alternatives by promoting emergent growth, contributing to a bio-circular economy that emphasises biodegradability and reduces energy consumption. The use of mycelium began to gain visibility in the early 2000s. Ecovative Design, founded in 2007 by Eben Bayer and Gavin

McIntyre, pioneered mycelium composites as sustainable alternatives to plastic and synthetic materials.[5] Ecovative has since become known for its mycelium composite packaging products used for an array of purposes, from computers to flat-pack furniture, and are now pursuing products for garments, the built environment, and even food.[6]

For interior designers, bio-based materials offer potential for aligning with a growing awareness of visual biophilia and indoor air quality, as well as for acoustic performance. A project like *In Vivo*, the Belgian pavilion at the 2023 Venice Architecture Biennale, an interior space defined by variegated mycelium panels supported by crisply machined wood framework, proposes an alternative materiality that embodies less wasteful and healthier material choices.[7] Meanwhile, the Swedish company Nordgröna has developed an extensive line of sound-absorbing interior finishes made with reindeer moss that seemingly make an aesthetic experience of the outdoors part of the indoors.[8] Furthermore, in shifting from manufactured materials to grown materials, bio-based materials suggest a shift in designers' perspectives to acknowledge the interconnectedness of living systems.

Mycelium is gaining traction in the built environment, including interior finishes and furnishings, where its noise and shock-absorbing properties have made it particularly interesting.[9] Yet, despite nearly two decades of development, the fundamental challenge remains: when interior designers traditionally value control, permanence, and aesthetic consistency, how can one design with materials that have biological imperatives and may change over time? And how does one address the attendant feelings of dread and disgust as expressed in the dreams above?

Reflections on four experiences with living materials — mycelium and moss — and the unplanned encounters that arose with each, probe how *the unplanned* manifests not as design failure, but as an inherent quality of working with living systems in interior environments.

mycelium's spontaneous materiality — *round rhizome rings*: expressing the variation of hyphal growth

Round Rhizome Rings (*RRR*) are acoustic tiles and screens for indoor use made of mycelium composites, which are connected with brass fittings and can be hung or fastened to walls [Fig. 01]. The project aimed to explore circularity by using modular mycelium tiles to address waste generated by furniture production. According to Australia's Waste and Resource Recovery Report, the overall resource recovery rate was 66 per cent in 2022–23, with recycling at 63 per cent. However, recovery of plastics, a material common in furniture, was only 12 per cent.[10] In response to this, mycelium presented an intriguing alternative.

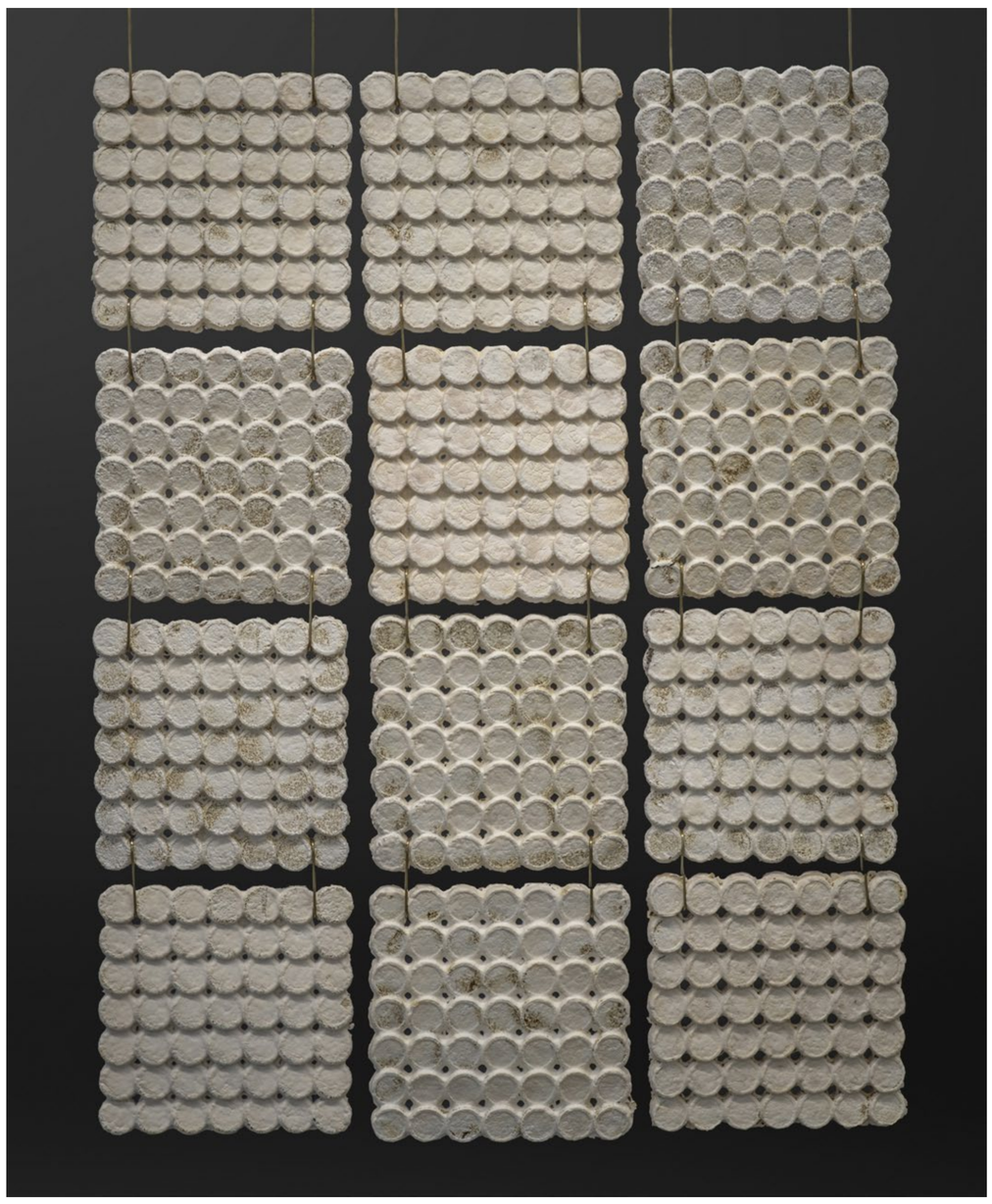


Figure 01.
Round Rhizome Rings are modular, acoustic tiles, which can be suspended. Photograph: Adam Thomas, 2023.

Mycelium is the subterranean, rhizomatic, chitinous network of hyphae, which, for fungi, are akin to the roots of plants. Through their mycelium, fungi break down organic matter, absorb nutrients, and communicate. As it grows,

mycelium colonises a substrate, like cellulose-rich woodchips, to form a bio-based composite. When dried to stop further growth, this bio-based composite becomes a lightweight foam, covered in a whitish skin. This foam has energy-absorbing qualities, making it particularly well-suited to interior acoustic treatments. After its useful life, when returned to the land, mycelium can biodegrade within a month under ideal conditions (of heat, moisture, and access to air, soil, and decomposers), contributing to a more ecological built environment.[11]

Experiments with rhizomatic growth of mycelial hyphae and various connection methods led to the creation of *RRR*. As *RRR* was made in a studio space without proper scientific equipment for sterilisation, it used commercially prepared, pre-mixed mycelium and substrate, comprising Australian reishi (*Ganoderma steyaertanum*), rice husks, and sawdust. The designers tested various forms and materials for reinforcing the mycelium (such as cotton, silk, and paper) to determine the most suitable tile patterns, moulding techniques, dimensions, and approach to modularity. The designers also tested different materials and techniques for the ease and strength of connecting modules, including copper, bronze, rubber, and paper strings. At the same time, the designers explored the effects of different durations of each step in the incubating process, layering tiles and baking on growth time, colours, and textures. All these experiments were conducted without a specific plan for a precise outcome. These experiments revealed that in the conditions of the studio, producing a consistent surface appearance would be almost impossible.

The environmental conditions in which mycelium is grown — temperature, light, humidity, and duration — impact its outward appearance. Variations in these conditions cause tiles to exhibit different colours and patterns [Fig. 02]. Rather than controlling these variations, the design embraced them. *RRR* evolved into a modular system of rotatable mycelium tiles, where the unplanned became a design feature. Each tile's colour variation told a story of its growing conditions, creating a material palette that no human designer could fully pre-determine.



Figure 02.
The tiles of *Round Rhizome Rings* exhibit unplanned variations in texture and colour. Photograph: Adam Thomas, 2023.

the dread of spontaneous material expression

At the initial stages of mycelium growth on substrates, its appearance is white and fluffy, with a soft, velvety texture that impresses most people unfamiliar with the material. This initial aesthetic delight soon yields to an unpredictability that follows, as different shades of yellows, oranges, and browns start to appear in response to environmental conditions [Fig. 03]. For untrained eyes, it may even become difficult to discern whether what is growing is mycelium or perhaps unwanted white mould, despite having undergone carefully planned growing conditions involving sterilisation, temperature, humidity, and light control.

This material transformation challenges our modern sensibilities in profound ways. British anthropologist Mary Douglas writes, dirt is 'matter out of place.'[12] Nothing is inherently dirty. Organic soil in the garden is not the least bit dirty. But dirt in the wrong place violates an underlying system, and sense of order. The mycelium tiles of *RRR* may appear dirty, with their different shades of

brown and white and uneven texture, and evoke something living or having lived in the viewer's imagination.



Figure 03.
Two discs are grown side by side (top). Their colours change after they are baked in an oven to stop their growth (bottom). Photograph: Gyungju Chyon, 2023.

The tiles thus raise a sense of uncertainty and foreboding about what might happen next. This sense is what psychologists Robin Kowalski and others call *dread*.[13] As they explain, dread is experienced as an emotion — an overall feeling — regarding fearful or worrisome events that seem highly likely to occur. Dread may arise from a lack of clarity (such as whether one can safely walk down a dimly lit alley), a feeling of uncertainty, or a lack of control. Dread ties into our fears of the unknown, whether people, things, events, places, or circumstances.[14] In his analysis of creepiness in the settings of horror films, psychologist Francis McAndrew writes that the uncertainty of whether something unusual may be, in fact, harmful incites a fear response as a means of alerting the body to a potentially harmful situation, and thus to its own mortality.[15] For example, he cites the heightened sense of alertness one experiences when walking through the woods at night and hearing rustling in the bushes. Citing similar causes to Kowalski and others — a lack of clarity and legibility, and ambiguity — he notes, 'The typical haunted house is large, dark, surrounded by overgrown vegetation,' 'full of rotting wood.'[16] Similarly, dense forests arouse similar feelings due to their being 'full of densely packed trees, rotting logs, moss, and underbrush.'[17] The qualities Kowalski and McAndrew describe as being associated with dread and fear stand in stark contrast to legibility, clarity, control, and orderliness of modern environments.

Indeed, the modern world has been characterised by the removal of filth, from the construction of sewer systems to the introduction of sanitation services to limitations on owning livestock in urban areas to the increasingly widespread use of antiseptics.[18] For historian David S. Barnes, the early modern period 'rested upon a rejection of excrement, bodily odours, and everything reminiscent of human beings' base, animal origins.'[19] Modern material culture, from homes, to offices, to cities and zoning, to practices, has rested upon an underlying assumption that removing traces of biological processes of decay is to be eliminated from our surroundings, and that everything ought to be put in its proper place. Interior designer Julieanna Preston notes that this sense of orderliness and control — of hygiene — underlies the ubiquitous 'smooth, white uniform plaster wall' of our modern interiors.[20]

In conversation, a curator from a prominent gallery described mycelium as resembling burnt toast. However, the curator continued, this was surely a transient problem and would be technically solved so the material would be uniform in appearance. The curator's comments suggested that, for him, mycelium would ideally be so denatured it would become what designers Ezio Manzini and Pasquale Cau, in *Material of Invention*, call a 'technological material' or 'material without qualities.'[21] For Manzini and Cau, such materials are known to us not by their material appearance and meaning, but by their technological performance. Rather than

being known to us experientially, like marble, or oak, or porcelain, or glass, they might be known through their functioning — waterproof materials, self-cleaning materials, insulative materials, stain-repellent materials, or corrosion-resistant materials.

Consequently, *RRR* poses new challenges by introducing unfamiliar bio-aesthetic experiences. This project illustrates how the unplanned in bio-based materials operates on multiple temporal scales: the immediate unpredictability of growth conditions, the medium-term changes in appearance over weeks, and the long-term biodegradation that makes these materials fundamentally different from conventional interior finishes.

what ate my seat: embracing the failure of control and the spectacle of decay

Perhaps to assuage the dreams one of the authors had been having about mycelium, and the attendant feelings of dread — the worry of what may happen next, whether that be contamination or colonisation — that author decided to shift the location of the next project to the outdoor gardens of people's homes. These spaces are not part of the public realm but rather an extension of domestic interiors.[22] *What Ate My Seat* was an experiment in allowing mycelium composites to weather outdoors completely. While indoor tiles manifested the variations in the environmental conditions of their creation as variations in colour and texture, we, the authors, became curious about how mycelium might transform when exposed to outdoor conditions, including rain, sun, wind, and non-human creatures. Three low stools (approximately 300 × 200 × 200 mm) were moulded from mycelium composites and placed outdoors in three different locations in Victoria, Australia [Fig. 04]. The stools were produced using a premixed composite of *Ganoderma steyaertanum*, rice husks, and sawdust. Each of the three stools was observed and photographed over the course of weeks and months to compare how they fared in their localities. The multiple locations offered the potential to document the impacts of different time scales, and across different seasons: autumn and winter in Australia.

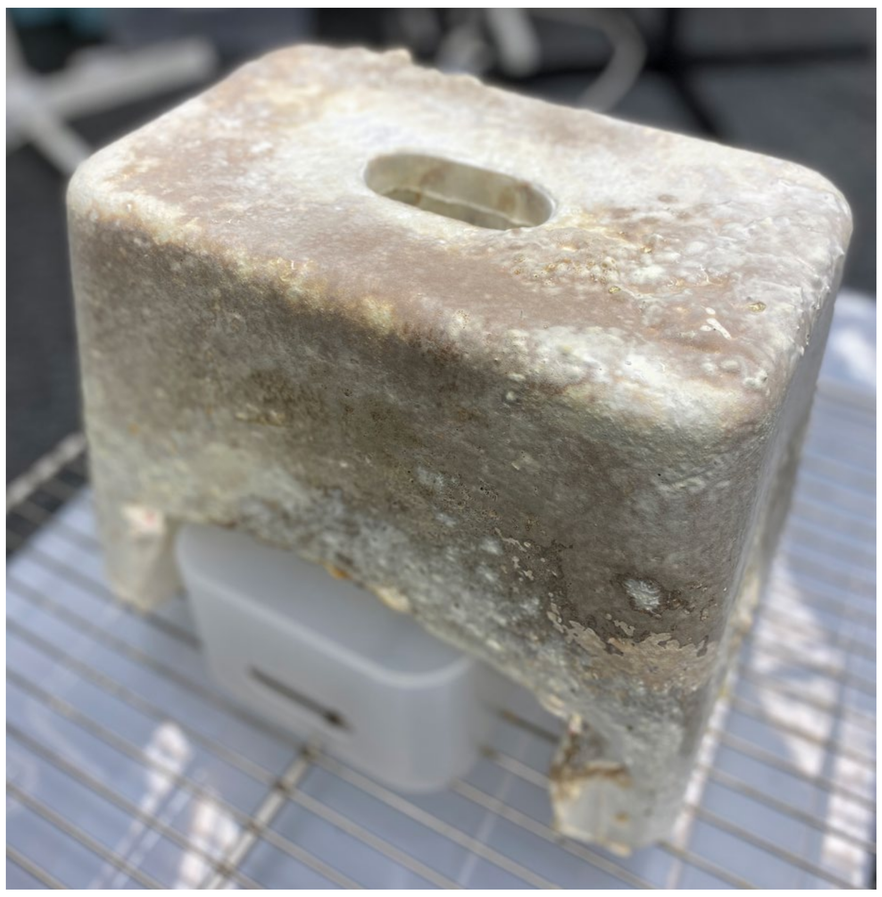


Figure 04.
Mycelium composite stool right after it is baked in the oven. Photograph: Gyungju Chyon, 2023.



Figure 05.
After two months of exposure to the outdoor weather, the mycelium of *What Ate My Seat* starts to regrow alongside other organisms. Photograph: Simon Lloyd, 2023.



Figure 06.
What Ate My Seat continually changed colours, shifting between white, brown, and red, while it was exposed to the sun and rain. Photograph: Suzette Jackson, 2023.

Despite having been oven-dried for three hours at 95°C to halt growth, the three stools underwent considerable changes in Victoria's temperate climate with frequent rain. When placed outdoors without protective treatments, the materials followed natural decay and growth cycles. They transformed from their initial fluffy white coating to yellow, brown, bright orange, and dark grey as they cycled between dry and wet conditions [Fig. 05]. One stool's texture became thick as if more mycelia had grown, while another seemed to lose its mycelial skin, exposing the foamy composite of rhizome and substrate [Fig. 06]. Most concerning was the apparent growth of mould on parts of the stools, which raised concerns about health implications. The idea that the stool could become an attractor for black mould and a harbinger of respiratory disease was troubling.

confronting the disgust of uncontrolled life

For us, the authors, the transformations undergone by *What Ate My Seat* and the ensuing worry about mould in relation to health concerns once again brought up feelings of dread and disgust. *What Ate My Seat* directly confronted deep-seated anxieties about biological processes. As historian William Ian Miller writes, what disgusts us is life itself, spontaneous, unplanned, and out-of-place life: 'What disgusts, startlingly, is the capacity for life, and not just because life implies its correlative death and decay: for it is decay that seems to engender life.'[23] Consumed by snails, transformed by the weather, and attracting mould, the stools came to embody precisely the kind of unplanned life Miller identifies as fundamentally disgusting.

As David S. Barnes points out, the sense of disgust is complex, being both natural and manmade, instinctive and learned, automatic, intensely physical, and unmediated by conscious thought.[24] The horror we felt watching mould appear on the stools triggered these deep-seated responses. Theorist David Trotter notes that filth and the attendant foul odours, miasmas, became associated with disease in late nineteenth-century theories of zymotic contagion in which illness was understood to arise from effluvia of dead plant and animal material.[25] This has shaped contemporary responses to certain olfactory stimuli that trigger a sense of disgust, as smell is one of the gatekeeper senses that serve as alerts to existential dangers in food and the environment. Touch and vision are cues for possible attendant noxious odours.[26] Over time, William Ian Miller writes, the links between smell, touch, and sight have created disgusting sights and textures: oozy, slimy, soft, and viscous textures, and sights that suggest unnerving odours, tastes, and touches.[27]

Mycelium composites challenge modern sensibilities more broadly. They may be far from inert, as they may change from day to day and season to season. Fungi are also nature's great decomposers, playing an essential role in food chains by breaking down plant and animal matter to make it available for other biological processes. In this sense, returning to the gallery curator, fungal mycelium suggests the cyclicality of biological processes and the place of humans within them. For this reason, mycelium risks being seen as offensive, or even uncivilised; it challenges centuries of our shaping of disgust, and places us back in a pre-modern world of biological cycles.

Mycelium exhibits spontaneous growth. Mycelium colonises, taking over and consuming organic materials spontaneously. In this, mycelium confronts the uncomfortable and unnerving feeling of being beyond human control. It conjures fears of one's own body being colonised. It reminds us collectively of humanity's symbiotic dependence on the microbial world and that fungi are contained within human bodies. After all, over half of the body's cells are not its own, but are those of a constellation of bacteria, viruses, fungi, and archaea.[28]

Perhaps for such reasons, while teaching, we found that many students had a real reluctance to engage with mycelium. Their hesitation and strong emotional reactions were palpable, whether arising from colouration, texture, or the unknown. This

hesitation also suggests that, if the sense of disgust is both instinctive and learned, it can be unlearned, and this unlearning is one of the challenges mycelium faces in its use in our interiors.

What Ate My Seat's fascinating and powerful transformations through elements, microorganisms, and non-human species demonstrated both the resilience of bio-based materials and the force of the unpredictable interplay between matter and environment. These changing colours and textures are challenging when thinking about growth as a design parameter. *What Ate My Seat* reveals how the unplanned in bio-based materials extends beyond human control to encompass entire ecological networks that view designed objects as habitat and food.

hidden and unplanned ecosystems: when moss brings more than expected

It was spring when we, the authors, first ordered moss for a design project exploring the interplay between fog and moss. To experiment, we ordered several different types — fern, sheet, and pillow moss — and eagerly awaited their delivery. The mosses arrived carefully packed atop their soil or wood chip substrata in plastic takeaway boxes. We eagerly unpacked and positioned the mosses in a considered location away from direct sunlight, where we could mist them regularly and cover them at night, and where they would feel at home. Two months later, our moss was thriving with verdant foliage even in the soaring temperatures of the Australian summer. Then, one by one, things started to emerge…

One morning, we were amused by the appearance of very small, bright orange fungi growing from the fern moss. They disappeared almost as quickly, though, and we wondered whether they might return. Days later, we noticed some small flies living within the pillow moss and sheet moss. Thinking they might be fruit flies, we paid little attention. As temperatures rose, however, ever more flies were crawling in and buzzing around the moss. Within a day, the flies multiplied to form a cloud hovering above the dense, protective habitat of the moss. Aghast at the sight, we did not know exactly what to do. In hindsight, these may have been fungus gnats, but we were novices in working with plants and moss. A few days later, we saw a mysterious orange worm crawling across the fern moss. Without a moment's hesitation, we killed the worm. Another morning, we saw a white moth sitting on the fern moss. Without thinking, we killed that, too [Fig. 07]. Upon reflection, this may have been to prevent them from multiplying like the flies. Regardless, feelings of guilt ensued.



Figure 07.
Left: a mushroom grows from moss in a plastic container, which was placed in a room. Right: the moth seemed to appear from the moss and was killed immediately upon being spotted. Photograph: Gyungju Chyon, 2021.

the multiplicity and disgust of ecological invasion

The moss brought with it an entire ecosystem of intrusive, free-loading worms, flies, moths, and fungi, which we, the authors, found threatening. Our strong reaction to this ecosystem revealed what philosopher Aurel Kolnai identifies as the core of disgust: 'Life in the wrong place' is disgusting, he writes.[29] More specifically, disgust arises from the 'deformation and detritus of life.'[30] For William Ian Miller, disgust is associated with contamination, infection, and pollution. Pollution is tied up in things being in the wrong place; hair on our heads is normal, whereas hair in our soup is offensive.[31] The moss and our reaction to it bear this out, as the worms, flies, moths, and fungi were not inherently disgusting but were profoundly out of place in our controlled interior environment.

We are not alone in our violent reaction to out-of-place insects. Textile artist Svenja Keune describes a similar reaction of disgust followed immediately by violence in her encounter with a swarm of hundreds of insects (lacewings).[32] These insects had taken up residence for the autumn and winter, enwrapped in curtains and textiles stored in her greenhouse. Upon discovering them, while cleaning up the greenhouse, a feeling of disgust followed, which resulted in the massacre of the lacewings. As she recounts, 'Disgust, discomfort, and pity were felt during the killing, shame, anger, remorse, and sadness arose with the process of contextualising the event.'[33]

Philosopher Carolyn Korsmeyer writes, 'vision can evoke disgust fairly easily by engaging the synthetic imagination.'[34] The sight of the cloud of flies hovering above our moss triggered this kind of imaginative response, in which we could envision the contamination spreading, the loss of control, and the invasion of our space by unwanted life forms. Although intellectually understanding these creatures were part of an ecosystem and not a threat, we nonetheless reacted by killing them without hesitation. Presumably, Keune had a similar imaginative response to the lacewings in her greenhouse that triggered her similarly violent response. This kind of response reveals how deeply embedded the authors' modern sensibilities are in maintaining clear boundaries between wanted and unwanted life.

We had wanted moss and instead got an entire ecosystem of biota, and we were not sure we wanted that.[35] When the moss arrived, packaged in a plastic takeaway container and delivered by post, it seemed just like any other mail-order item. The way we ordered, paid for, and received it made us forget the moss was a living thing taken from the shadow of a tree somewhere, and thus part of a wider ecosystem. The moss had been transformed into another mail-order consumer product. So, receiving it was kind of like receiving a book. Thus, far from being welcome additions to the purchase, fungi, flies, worms, and moths were stowaways and intruders in our living space. Our response to the files and moth led us to wonder, if, as philosopher Timothy Morton writes, all living and non-living things are tightly interconnected to form a vast meshwork of mutual co-existence, where do humans draw the boundary of what to welcome and what to keep out?[36]

We felt, momentarily, as if our space was under attack by unwanted guests. Historian of health and hygiene Virginia Smith writes, when entities crop up in unwanted places, people clean them up by removing them.[37] To our sensibilities, oil on the living room floor is grime, uncultivated plants are seen as weeds, and unintended insects, birds, and mammals are seen as pests, or even dangers. So, when unplanned or unanticipated, the appearance of organisms may not only be unwelcome, but may be viewed as invasive, as in the case with the appearance of unintended lifeforms — the worms, flies, moths, and fungi — that emerged from our moss.

the dust that wasn't is covering invisible inhabitants

One day, we noticed fine red dust beneath some artefacts we had been storing in a lab space on the university campus. Although not a sterile space, we had outfitted the lab with an incubator, an oven, and shelving for storing models and prototypes, and had been using it to make mycelium objects as part of design teaching, and for artefacts that had been publicly exhibited at a furniture store and an art gallery. The mycelium composites we used were prepared off-site by professionals and transported to campus for us to use. Throughout the growth process, we followed established protocol to ensure sterile surfaces to prevent any unwanted contamination or growth of organisms. Most of our experiments with mycelium composites successfully grew without contamination into desired artefacts. Perhaps for all the above reasons, we paid little attention when the red dust appeared [Fig. 08].

Over time, we noticed increasingly more red dust under the artefacts. Looking closer, amid this red dust, we also noticed numerous tiny, black, seed-like particles. We wondered what was causing all this, and what these black particles and red dust could possibly be. Closer inspection revealed the black particles to be countless tiny insects. We were immediately horror-stricken and filled with disgust.



Figure 08.
Fine wood dust from the sawdust, which makes up the mycelium composite, was found underneath the artefact. Photograph: Gyungju Chyon, 2024.

the horror of hidden colonisation

Some research and consultation with an entomologist determined these were possibly fungus weevils, which had burrowed through the mycelium, exposing the artefacts' substrates. In fact, most of the artefacts stored in the room were infested and harbouring a colony of these insects. Although we carefully planned the making process and stored these items away, wrapped in plastics and kept in plastic containers, insects still found a way to get into the mycelium, gorging themselves and thereby causing havoc and irrevocable damage.

The discovery of the weevils embodied William Ian Miller's observation that the feeling of disgust is tied to feelings of invasiveness. Miller writes, 'The disgusting can possess us, fill us with creepy, eerie feelings of not quite being in control, of being haunted.'[38] The realisation that our carefully stored artefacts had been secretly colonised by insects created precisely this sense of being invaded and possessed by forces beyond our control.

The fungus weevils represented an affront to our modern sensibilities. Citing Norbert Elias, historian David S. Barnes notes that our sense of disgust is the byproduct of a 'civilizing process', a learning over time that has gradually forced instinctive and 'animalistic' behaviours into the margins and has steadily sought to mute bodily functions and expression.[39] That a hidden ecosystem was thriving within the supposedly controlled and impervious interior of the lab space revealed the limits of this civilising process when confronted with living materials.

The challenge extends beyond the making process. In addition to the reservations of the curator and the hesitancy of students we have taught in design studios, we have encountered people who find mycelium composite artefacts unpleasant, icky, or even disgusting. This response aligns with what philosopher Carolyn Korsmeyer describes as 'aesthetic disgust' — the arousal of disgust that both apprehends artistic properties and constitutes a component of appreciation.[40] When disgust is intended, as in horror films, it can be effective and valuable. However, when unplanned, the effect becomes adverse.[41]

The visceral reaction some people have to mycelium — and bio-based materials more generally — thus stems from some deeply rooted fears in modern society, and with tendencies that run counter to modernity. In Western society, people have come to consider interiors as controlled, safe, and hygienic spaces that protect them and their belongings from inclement weather and invasion by other creatures. Interiors are the products of the careful control and design of not only white-painted plasterboard walls and polished floors, but also the artificial environments recreated by air-conditioning and

lighting systems that serve to buffer us from and lift us out of day-to-day relations with the natural environment. And when these interiors are breached, as they frequently are, by dirt, mould, mildew, bedbugs, and dust mites, the response is to eradicate the offenders immediately. In contrast to these modern sensibilities, mycelium may evoke deep fears of unplanned biological phenomena: living things out of place; spontaneous, unplanned life; and of life and death, decomposition and decay, and the bio-cyclicality of the food chain.

conclusion: learning to live and design with the unplanned

The dreams that opened this essay reveal the unconscious anxieties that underlie our experiments with bio-based materials. When it comes to bio design, we, the authors, are not alone in our sense of worried apprehension. In design studio teaching, we have encountered resistance from students who may find working with mycelium off-putting or even frightening. As the ecosystem of worms, flies, moths, and fungi brought by our moss, and as the fungus weevils that fed on the mycelium artefacts exemplify, 'life in the wrong place' can indeed be disgusting and elicit strong responses.[42] The unplanned growth, change, decay, and irregularities of bio-based materials not only challenge conventional aesthetics and expectations of the modern world, such as control, permanence, and aesthetic consistency, but can also evoke deep-seated feelings of *ickiness* and apprehension.

Yet, while these anxieties suggest the need for barriers — it might be best to avoid the unwanted ecosystems and invaders — they also point toward new possibilities for interior design: spaces that acknowledge their own temporality, embrace change and decay as natural processes, and invite more intimate relationships with the living systems that surround us.

The aesthetic challenges posed by mycelium also offer opportunities for deeper engagement with materiality. Rather than championing the traces of mycelium's biological nature, commercial mycelium products have highlighted technical performance — such as being compostable, renewable, bio-cyclical, fire-resistant, hydrophobic, insulative, scalable, customisable, carbon-sequestering, plastic- and chemical-free, and having low environmental impact. These efforts involve the development of growing methods that produce uniformly white products, and of sealants and coatings that render mycelium inert in the face of changing atmospheric conditions. In their attempts to control and domesticate, they seemingly remove the mycelium of its biological origin to the point that it is no longer recognisable as grown and living and strip it of its own expressive potential for communicating an ecological aesthetics. It effectively becomes what Manzini and Cau called a 'technological material' or 'material without qualities.'[43] In retrospect, when the authors' mail-order moss was delivered in plastic take-away boxes, it was robbed of some of its ecological qualities, making it that much more shocking when other lifeforms began to emerge from it. While this 'technological material' may be useful for the circular economy, it does nothing to make people aware of the interconnectedness of living systems. This is noted by Svenja Keune, when she critiques the industrialised production of bio-based materials using organisms, like bacteria, as merely continuing a controlling approach that leaves little room for the livingness of living organisms to be part of the process, while continuing an extractive and damaging worldview.[44]

For us as designers, mycelium and moss became a way to begin to understand the dual nature, or bidirectionality, of living systems being both creative and destructive, as noted by Anna Tsing, and what we found along the way was not always comfortable.[45] For the spectacle of natural processes of growth and change on multiple temporal scales through material variegation, dynamics, and eventual biodegradation was also accompanied by feelings of dread, horror, and

disgust. To truly arrive at an interconnectedness of our interiors and living systems, rather than eliminate this dual nature and remove properties by processing them out, perhaps we can find ways of following them and working with them.

Reflecting on our experiences with mycelium and moss leaves us with a number of big questions, which are not easily addressed. Can interior designers expect to overcome wider societal tendencies that favour permanence and stasis, in favour of the qualities of growth and change bio-based materials like mycelium offer? Will interior designers be content with relinquishing some of their control to materials that may evade it? Is it even possible for interior designers to hope to transform the sense of unease and dread of decay — of becoming part of the cycle of life — associated with mycelium into a sense of interconnectedness with natural processes?

In order to fully embrace the interconnectedness of our interiors and the natural world, designers will have to embrace the unplanned, with the knowledge that that may entail the unintended and maybe even the undesirable. Bio-based materials can bring built environments into wider reciprocity with the natural environment. The question is, are designers ready?

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author biographies

John Stanislav Sadar is Associate Professor of Architecture at Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne. He is interested in how buildings and artefacts mediate the relationship between the body and the natural world. He is partner at Little Wonder Studio, whose work has been awarded, exhibited, and published internationally.

Gyungju Chyon is a senior lecturer in the Spatial Design programme at Monash University. She investigates ecological issues through the relationships between materials and environments, encompassing a wide variety of materials. Her work (Little Wonder Studio) has been featured in Forbes magazine and is part of the NGV's permanent collection.

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