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idea journal

imagining interiors

Special Issue
Edinburgh College of Art
The University of Edinburgh

vol. 23, no. 02

2026

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.

https://journal.idea-edu.com

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 and Interior Architecture Educators Association.

www.idea-edu.com

The objectives of IDEA are:

1. Objects

1.1 The general object of IDEA is the advancement of education by:

(a) encouraging and supporting excellence in interior design/interior architecture/spatial design education and research globally and with specific focus on Oceania; and

(b) being an authority on, and advocate for, interior design/interior architecture/spatial design education and research.

1.2 The specific objects of IDEA are:

(a) to be an advocate for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes at a minimum of AQF7 or equivalent education in interior design/interior architecture/spatial design;

(b) to support the rich diversity of individual programmes within the higher education sector;

(c) to create collaboration between programmes in the higher education sector;

(d) to foster an attitude of lifelong learning;

(e) to encourage staff and student exchange between programmes;

(f) to provide recognition for excellence in the advancement of interior design/interior architecture/spatial design education; and

(g) to foster, publish, and disseminate peer reviewed interior design/interior architecture/spatial design research.

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Institutional Members:

Membership is open to programmes at higher education institutions in Australasia that can demonstrate an ongoing commitment to the objectives of IDEA.

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Affiliate membership is open to programmes at higher education institutions in Australasia that do not currently qualify for institutional membership but support the objectives of IDEA. Affiliate members are non-voting members of IDEA.

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Associate membership is open to any person who supports the objectives of IDEA. Associate members are non-voting members of IDEA.

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In recognition of their significant contribution as an initiator of IDEA, a former chair and/or executive editor: Julieanna Preston, Chris Cottrell, Suzie Attiwill, Rachel Carley, Lynn Chalmers, Lynn Churchill, Jill Franz, Anthony Fryatt, Susan Hedges, Roger Kemp, Tim Laurence, Gini Lee, Marina Lommerse, Gill Matthewson, Antony Pelosi, Dianne Smith, Harry Stephens, George Verghese, Andrew Wallace, and Bruce Watson.

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copy editor

Madeleine Collinge Publishing Services

design + production

Lauren Poynter

Imagining Interior conference graphic identity

Nicky Regan

correspondence

Correspondence regarding this publication should be addressed to:

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

special issue partners

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Interior Educators

imagining interiors EDINBURGH 2025

UTS

Imagining Interior 2025 conference provocation

‘Imagining Interiors’ is a deliberately ambiguous title, that can refer both to the process of making things up, creating, dreaming, describing and so on; and also, more literally, to the activity of making images.

In *The Emergence of the Interior* (2008) the interior historian Charles Rice writes of the ‘doubleness’ of the designed interior – both as a space to be occupied, and an image to be contemplated. Seventeen years on, in a world saturated by images imagined by machines, what might that doubleness actually mean? What opportunities might it present to people who design, build, and occupy – imagine – interiors?

This conference invites contributions that re-imagine interiors – that is, what interiors might be, as practice or product. These re-imaginings will be of interest to the designers, historians and theorists of interiors and to those who study its representation (imagination) in film, fiction, journalism or other media.

We invite contributions in the form of papers that might be spoken and written, and images that can be imagined and exhibited.

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conference organising committee

Ed Hollis, The University of Edinburgh
Dave Loder, The University of Edinburgh
Gina Olsson, The University of Edinburgh
Andy Siddall, The University of Edinburgh
Rachel Simmonds, The University of Edinburgh
Gillian Treacy, The University of Edinburgh

reviewers for this issue

Christina Deluchi, University of Technology Sydney
Daniel Brown, Victoria University of Wellington
Dave Loder, The University of Edinburgh
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foreword

It is with great pleasure that *Idea Journal* has partnered with Edinburgh College of Art, The University of Edinburgh, to publish this special issue, *Imagining Interiors*. Its essays come to us care of the UK's Interior Educators Imagining Interiors conference, held at Edinburgh College of Art in November 2025. Its aims were to examine and re-imagine how we represent, design, and understand interiors through their historical, contemporary, and emerging relationships with image-making practices and visual culture.

IDEA: The Interior Design + Interior Architecture Educators Association and the UK's Interior Educators are two organisations with parallel histories on either side of the globe. Initiated independently, they have both responded to the need within educational and academic environments to provide forums for collective academic voices within a discipline that crosses the boundaries between design, art, and spatial practices. Both have been dedicated to developing an intellectual community of scholars and practitioners engaged with the histories, theories, practices, and experimental futures of interior and spatial design.

Equally, Edinburgh College of Art and *Idea Journal* have their own shared history. Several members of the Edinburgh team responsible for organising the 2025 conference have engaged with *Idea Journal* over many years since its 1999 inauguration, as academic writers, contributors, and guest editors. Details of this noteworthy history are warmly described in the Editorial Introduction for this issue by Ed Hollis and Rachel Simmonds. The publication of this special issue begins a new chapter in our ongoing relationship, continuing an intellectual engagement in the ever-expanding field of research concerning the conceptual, material, and social relationships between people and their interior environments.

Working with the authors of this special issue has been a great privilege, and we have been delighted to see the development of their insights and creative engagements with the questions and practices of working with images in the interior. We are also grateful to this issue's peer reviewers for their thoughtful consideration and feedback.

Please enjoy this 2026 special issue of *Idea Journal: Imagining Interiors*.

Sincerely,

Luke Tipene
Executive Editor of *Idea Journal*
0000-0003-0928-3839

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in this issue

6 foreword
Luke Tipene

8 editorial introduction: imagining interiors — 2025 interior educators conference
Ed Hollis
Rachel Simmonds

27 seeing double: reflections on an unrealised interior
Shaun Young

44 soft minimalism: georgia o'keeffe's aesthetics of photographic personhood
Chris Fernald

57 image as moment
Gillian Treacy

66 *looking-beyond-seeing*: the interwar interior as mediated
Vanessa Vanden Berghe

80 ossian's hall of mirrors: nature, artifice, and the environmental imagination
Ro Spankie

94 image as host
Gina Olsson

103 tracing subjective spatial experience through architectural drawings
Andrea Placidi
Orit Sarfatti

116 the interior as digital disruptor
Pamela Flanagan

130 images between imagination and memory
Dave Loder

140 *this voice; this life; this procession*: sensorial journeys and entanglements with lidar and kinect in virginia woolf's writing room
Brass Art:
Chara Lewis
Kristin Mojsiewicz
Anneké Pettican

157 imagining the unseen: ai, memoryscapes, and the interiorities of the red road flats
Xiaobin Huang

editorial introduction
imagining interiors — 2025 interior educators conference

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

Rachel Simmonds
University of Edinburgh
0000-0002-0477-4797

This Special Issue of *Idea Journal* consists of contributions from the Interior Educators, Imagining Interiors Conference, 2025, held at Edinburgh College of Art, The University of Edinburgh on 13 and 14 November 2025. It includes a selection of eight essays that explore themes of re-imagined interiors as practice or product that will be of interest to the designers, historians, and theorists of interiors and to those who study its representation and imagining in film, fiction, journalism, and other media. In addition to these texts, the Special Issue also includes three visual essays that draw together a selection of image contributions from the peer-reviewed exhibition that accompanied the conference.

Imagining Interiors aimed to explore several different relationships between images and interiors: to explore the use of images of pre-existing interiors (surviving or not) as historical evidence; to explore the ways in which images can generate interiors; to explore the ways in which we use interiors, and to explore the images we make of them, to re-imagine our own sense of interiority.

The conference was developed by a group of researchers at Edinburgh College of Art who explore ideas of the interior image from a diverse series of theoretical perspectives. Dave Loder brings an interest in the virtual, immersive interior image, and its currency in social media and the world of AI. This is evidenced through his key role in establishing the Image|Imaging|Interiors research cluster between Edinburgh College of Art and Glasgow School of Art. Rachel Simmonds's research into the work of modernist Nordic architects makes use of archives and images to explore their role in exhibition design of the twentieth century and also relationships between them and Scottish architects of this era. Ed Hollis's writing and drawing re-imagines interior histories as stories, by recomposing their form. Gillian Treacy's research into lighting and its atmospheres engages with the ways in which we visualise interior sensoria. Gina Olsson's work focuses on narrative brand environments in relation to image and materials [Fig 01.].

Imagining Interiors is one of a series of events sponsored by Interior Educators, the UK's subject body for Interior Design, since its foundation at the 2006 Interiors Forum Scotland conference. In 2024, the Interior Educators conference was hosted by Northumbria University. Entitled 'Practice', it focused on interiors as a discipline largely of re-use. In 2026, the Interior Educators conference 'Vacantscapes: Unfolding Interior' will be hosted by the Glasgow School of Art. It will explore new possibilities in the nature and potential of vacancy in interior architecture and its related fields. Imagining Interiors was sponsored by Interior Educators, but invited worldwide contributions, many of which are represented, in developed form, in this Special Issue of *Idea Journal*.

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Figure 01.
Photograph: Rachel Simmonds, 2025.

reflections on the interior and its images

Where did the theme of imagining interiors come from? What are the nuances and problematics of imagining interiors? And how have these ideas been put to work? Reflecting on these questions to begin framing this conference foregrounded the deep theoretical concerns that underpin foundational discourse on key concepts of interior space. It equally foregrounds the recent history of how such discourse has been collaboratively explored in Scotland and in Australasia with *Idea Journal* over the past two decades. In several ways, this conference picks up on a relationship that began to be comprehensively examined in a themed issue of *Idea Journal* from 2007, Volume 8.1 — Transitional Reflection, led by Jill Franz and Dianne Smith.[1] It has since been transformed by shifts in new perspectives, theories, and new technologies of interior and images that have equally been explored in subsequent issues of *Idea Journal*, and have emerged as major themes in much interiors research in the UK.

Published in 2007, Volume 8.1 of *Idea Journal* marked what was, at the time, noted as a 'point of transition' — both for the journal and the field of interior design itself.

> [...] a domain of meaning in which its constituent players and acts align to give it definition and generate practices that become the evolving rules of the game that continue to be contested.[2]

Among the contributions to that issue was an article by the Interiors Forum Scotland, which constituted the then five interiors programmes in Scottish Universities. Their essay, entitled 'Rethinking Inside the Box' equally reflected on a conference held in 2006 that was similarly titled 'Thinking Inside the Box.'[3] The essay correspondingly addressed changing practices of interior architecture in Scotland and called out the limited platforms for the representation and discourse of this practice area of spatial design.[4] It was, in retrospect, a formative event, welcoming a global audience and marking Scotland's 'first contact' with *Idea Journal* and the Australasian interiors representative body IDEA: The Interior Design / Interior Architecture Educators Association. It equally marked the formation, in a fringe meeting of the 2006 conference, of Interior Educators,

which parallels IDEA as the UK's representative body for interior education. The success of this consolidation of like-minded practitioners, educators, and theorists at this point of transition led in the following year to a second conference and reader by the Interiors Forum Scotland, entitled *Interior Tools, Interior Tactics*.[5]

These events, at this moment in time, foregrounded a number of key themes concerning the maturing field of interior education and research. First, they signalled their involvement in growing global attempts to define interior design practices as a unique pedagogical and theoretical entity. *Intimus: Interior Design Theory Reader*, for instance, was published the year before the Thinking Inside the Box conference.[6] The then Head of Interiors at Parsons NYC, Lois Weinthal's contribution to the 2006 conference was entitled 'Towards a New Interior' and pointed towards the comprehensive *Handbook of Interior Design* she co-edited with Graeme Brooker, now Head of Interior Design at the Royal College of Art in London.[7] Summative publications of this sort established a theoretical frame from which future enquiry on the interior, as a self-aware spatial design discipline, could depart.

Second, this moment of activity consolidated debates around interiors as the adaptive re-use of the architectural object. Written while they were both at Manchester Metropolitan University, Graeme Brooker and Sally Stone's book *Rereadings: Interior Architecture and the Design Principles of Remodelling Existing Buildings* had been published in 2004.[8] Additionally, Fred Scott's On *Altering Architecture* was published in 2007.[9] Considered by many as one of the founding fathers of interior architectural thinking, Scott's work has since paved the way for rich discourse and enquiry on interior thinking in the UK and Europe. The result is that re-use is now central as an architectural practice in a way that would have been unthinkable twenty years ago. It formed the theme of 'Practice', the Interior Educators conference that preceded Imagining Interiors in 2024.[10]

By contrast, contributions to the Thinking Inside the Box conference from Australasian colleagues challenged the predominance of architecture as a launch point for interior design practices. In 'What's in a Canon?' Suzie Attiwill of RMIT Melbourne suggested that there was, perhaps, no need for such an architectural idea, while the landscape scholar Gini Lee discussed interiors as forms of curation.[11] In certain ways, exploring expanded practices of interior and spatial design is work that *Idea Journal* has continued with the 'un' series under the editorial leadership of Luke Tipene: Unplanned (2025), Unbuilt (2024), Uncertain (2023), as well as (extra)ordinary (2021) with Julieanna Preston, Unbecoming (2013) lead by Ed Hollis, and Dark Space (2017) lead by Lynn Churchill.[12] It has also explored the impacts of interior themes and theories in other fields, including Economies (2011) led by Preston, Ecologies (2010) and Territories (2009) led by Lee, and Fictions (2022) led by Preston and Tipene.[13]

Adjacent to the Thinking Inside the Box conference was the leading body of historians of interiors: the Modern Interiors Research Centre, based at Kingston University in London. Their construction of the 'modern interior' is perhaps best expressed in Interior Historian Penny Sparke's eponymous book, which was also published in 2006.[14] It describes the interior as a production of the division between the domestic and public spheres in the industrial revolution. More recently, *Interiors in the Era of Covid* revises the earlier work on the Modern Interior by considering the fundamental restructuring of relations between the domestic and the public during the pandemic.[15]

imagining interior images since 2006

Among the varied concerns that emerged during this point of transition around 2006, the idea of imagining interiors did not, at the time, seem to make a significant appearance as a subject of inquiry. The Interiors Forum Scotland discussed it as a problem, rather than anything else, noting how:

> [...] design is often limited economically and logistically by the paper space abstraction of scaled visualising rather than real scale doing. Whilst other disciplines have highly visible expressions of their developing craft, (for example, painters paint, sculptors sculpt), interior design students rarely construct interiors.[16]

Additionally, these comments reflected common complaints at the time that the commodification on interior images in magazines and makeover television programs peddled false narratives of the discipline and all that it entailed, as if, somehow, images were not quite to be trusted.

There was, however, one contribution to the conference that brought together several of these concerns under the umbrella of images. Speaking on his recent publication 'The Emergence of the Interior', historian Charles Rice noted that the idea of an interior as the habitable inside of a building was a relatively recent appearance in the etymology of the word.

> It was only from the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, that the interior came to mean the inside of a building or room. Also in theatre, a 'set' containing the inside of a building or room.[17]

Noting the concurrent development of interior drawing practices and the invention of photography during the same period, he explored the historical correlation between the rise of the interior, as cultural object, and its images during the nineteenth century.

> The interior [...] emerges as a physical, three-dimensional space, as well as an image, whether it be a two-dimensional representation such as a painting, a print in a portfolio of decoration, or a flat backdrop that could conjure up as a theatrical scene.
>
> [...]
>
> Significantly, doubleness involves the interdependence between image and space, with neither sense being primary.[18]

Rice's idea of 'doubleness', as the simultaneity of the interior as both space and image forms a starting point for Imagining Interiors as an idea. A significant text for Rice in his formulation was Mario Praz's book *An Illustrated History of Interior Decoration*, which equally helped frame our approach to the themes of this conference.[19] It is an expensive book: a history told largely, as Praz freely admits in the introduction, through the use of beautiful images. In particular he harboured a fascination for early nineteenth-century watercolours of aristocratic interiors, often painted by the women who were confined within them, which he collected avidly, and which can still be seen in his apartment in Rome today.

Like Rice's analysis, in Praz's world of interior images, the interior itself is also an image — of its occupants. *The House of Life*, his autobiography, is written both as the story of his life and a walk through his own apartment, from room to room. At the end of the book, we find ourselves in the last room in the apartment, looking over his shoulder as it were, into a bullseye mirror.

> The person who looks into a mirror is myself, and this book that I have written is like a conspectus, in a convex mirror, of a life and of a house [...] I see myself as having become an object and an imagined museum piece among museum pieces, already detached and remote [...] I have looked at

> myself in a convex mirror, and have seen myself as no bigger than a handful of dust.[20]

Praz was a scholar of romantic literature, and our own sense of self in 2026 may be less solipsistic, less egoistic, than his. But the point remains: to imagine interiors is not just to use images to record (pre)existent interiors, or to generate new ones, but to contemplate our own sense of interiority too. As Rice noted, the 'image-based sense [of the interior] also encompasses a reverie or imaginal picture'.[21]

Images generate, as well as document, interiors. We can use images to call new interiors into being — literally to imagine them, using sketches to rehearse them with ourselves and within design teams, models, mood boards, and visualisations to sell them to clients; construction and production drawings to get them built. Or at least, that is what they do if we follow a largely architectural design process, in which the essence of the interior is understood to inhere in walls, floors, ceilings, furniture, and so on. Praz, like Rice, understands these material phenomena, however, as merely outward manifestations, traces, of the essence of any interior: the person who inhabits it.

If, as the Interiors Forum Scotland recognised in 2006, we transgress the ideas in 2025 that design is an act of visualising rather than making, the pages of a magazine or the screen of a television could constitute, rather than just represent, interiors. If the history of interiors is as much a history of media as it is of spaces; if those interior images explore attempts to represent the field's expanded themes of uncertainty, unbecoming, unplanning, unbuilding; if interior image production attempted to draw not, as architectural conventions might, fixed forms, but processes of adaptation, then the field of interiors might be further in its unique, experimental attempts to visualise itself.

reimagining interior images in 2025

At the same time as the Interiors Forum Scotland conferences were taking place in the early 2000s, London's Victoria and Albert Museum held a very different conference based on the same theme as our conference last year. 'Imagined Interiors' (2006) focused on images as evidence in and of design history, 'From the vantage point of the early twenty first century.'[22] As its editors, Jeremy Aynsley and Charlotte Grant describe,

> [...] across all facets of the media, images, descriptions and discussion of the domestic interior surround us. From television to magazine, exhibitions, trade shows and Internet, we constantly see and are sold images of ideal and real interiors.[23]

What was true in 2006 is multiply true now and itself foreshadowed several of the themes and issues that were present in the Imagined Interiors conference, almost twenty years later. First, the digital production of images has, simply, massively multiplied their number. In 2006, the digital photograph was still relatively new, and only just making its way onto the phone. The possibility of sharing them, let alone editing them with filters and so on, was still almost unknown. Second, in 2006, the production of interior images was still a privileged practice. The TV makeover show was broadcast — offering a dictatorship of taste (good or bad), and expert advice. Now such authorised advice must compete with millions of Instagram posts, through which anyone can tell a makeover story or pronounce on taste and style. Third, interiors themselves have become products, exchanged, sometimes monetised, as images: as the backgrounds to social media; as quasi domestic experiences on Airbnb; as self-design apps; as digital twins. The Paris Opera, for instance, hires the interior image of its own digital twin for corporate events. And, recently, the advent of generative AI precipitates the production of images by extra-

human agents — images that are then often read and consumed by other AIs, creating an autonomous world into which no eye peers. In 2006, we distrusted TV makeover programs. Now we trust no image at all, nor even our own capacity to distinguish between them. Imagining Interiors, then is an attempt to re-imagine images after two decades in which they, and our relationship with them, has been transformed beyond recognition.

imagining interiors 2025 — conference overview

introduction to panels

The conference was structured into the following five panels, entitled to explore a particular theme of imagining within the interior that was expressed by the grouping of speakers selected. Given the ambiguous nature of the conference's theme, as we had hoped, there were not just interesting connections made between speakers, but also between panel themes over the two days. Each panel can be summarised as follows:

panel one: interior fragments

How we perceive an interior is the result of fragments of information experienced. We engage with it through our own eyes, as well as through those of the creators of imagery around these spaces. We can therefore consider the interior to exist as a series of fragments in time. The first is in the mind of the designer, then through the relevant drawings and images that created it, and finally through the experience and recording of those who engage with it. It is through these varied fragments that we understand an interior on multiple levels.

In this panel we considered the fragmentation of interiors through engagement with spaces based on archive drawings, photographs, and documents as elements of information [Fig 02.]. These resulted in not just greater understanding of spaces, but also as starting points for new interpretations. We engaged with the process of this approach as much as the findings, sharing ideas around cataloguing experience and proposals in various analogue and digital formats. The result was a greater understanding of the interior as fragments of drawings, fragments of descriptions, fragments of conversations, fragments of images, and fragments of history.



Figure 02.
Photograph: Dean Chalmers, 2025.

panel two: interior imaging

As expounded by Rice, the modern interior has always been doubled by its image, a spatial experience and its self-representation that has informed the histories, aesthetics, and consumption of the interior. While he points to a plurality of various modes of publishing media from the modern period, the contemporary post-digital image-saturated and hyper-simulated environment delivers new technologies and modes by which images of interiors are produced, transcribed, and distributed. This panel considered the twenty-first century mediation of the interior across a diversity of platforms and stages, propagating new spatial imaginaries under the service of visually articulate capitalism, with a particular inflection upon domesticity [Fig 03.].

In areas of housing-led regeneration in numerous UK cities, a multitude of billboards and site hoardings host slick computer-generated visualisations of the residential interiors under construction, a self-replicating apparatus of images expressing ideals of individual domestic lifestyle. This is an imaging that exteriorises the privately imagined interior into the public urban realm. Equally, the domestic realm contains more discrete and less performative technologies to image and capture the inhabitable home and trouble imaginaries of privacy and autonomy. A growing complex of embedded sensors and cameras intrude upon the home, and inhabitants are themselves complicit to varying degrees to suggest new modes of domesticity and digitally mediated intimacy. However, under these pervasive conditions the early twentieth-century writer Virginia Woolf's demand for a room of one's own is increasingly challenging to secure. How can we resist the surveillance and commodification of the domestic sphere under capitalism's imaging of the interior?

The domestic interior is a contested site of in/visibilities, productive of digitally mediated imaginaries of contemporary living. By appropriating the apparatus of capture, perhaps these in/visibilities can be redeployed in the pursuit of freedom from a datafied circumstance. Can the interior be camouflaged to disrupt digital observation? Or can LiDAR be positioned as a non-invasive light-based media and creatively deployed to model alternative imaginaries of domesticity?



Figure 03.
Photograph: Rachel Simmonds, 2025.

panel three: reflecting the interior

Often, interiors are imagined as passive voids, occupied by active human subjects, or artefacts to be turned into images, which themselves are objects, made for the contemplation of other subjects. But this panel inverted these assumptions, suggesting instead that interiors and images produce subjects.

In this panel we considered the ways in which institutional interiors model discipline and behaviour, imposing conceptions of self-hood on their occupants, whether it suits them or not [Fig 04.].

We examined how public perceptions of the American artist Georgia O'Keeffe are constructed by imagined interiors: carefully curated images published in mid-century magazines of the carefully curated interiors of her ranch at Abiquiú, New Mexico, quite as much through the significance of her paintings. We extended the discussion to consider how the imagination of interiors on social media is an analogous machine of self-production.

At the other end of the scale, we considered how a collective subject, the entire nation of Modern Greece, is imaginatively constructed through the repeatedly re-imagined landscapes of central Athens, from the glorification of classical ruins in the nineteenth century, to Dimitris Pikionis''s landscape of jumbled fragments on the Philopappos Hill that suggests, instead, a continuity between the past and the present.



Figure 04.
Photograph: Dean Chalmers, 2025.

panel four: drawing out the interior

As we create images through the medium of drawing, we employ a range of methods and techniques to conceive of imaginary places yet to be realised, and/or record and reflect on interiors since completed. These drawings serve as modes of communication, exploratory devices, sets of instructions, and visual representations of ideas made manifest.

In this panel we discussed both how we use drawing to represent the interior experience, and how we read and respond to the drawings of others, as we explored the consequence and effects of image creation [Fig 05.]. Multiple approaches were conveyed, overlaying analogue and digital, in a series of hybrid explorations to enhance learning and understanding, to anticipate the experiential, and to reimagine interior narratives across time. We questioned the intended audience and purpose — what is it for? And who is it for, with consideration for both the maker and the user?

These diverse contributions captured multiple approaches to innovate and push the boundaries of 'drawing' as we viewed persuasive images of trajectory sections attempting to capture movement through time, interrogated how AI and traditional studio craft can be used to shape our teaching practice, and allowed the room and our audience to actively become the drawing, as we passed silk screenprints overhead in a final act of reimagining.



Figure 05.
Photograph: Dean Chalmers, 2025.

panel five: narrating the interior

To develop an understanding of an interior, past and present, we can refer to a range of creative research tools to expose human subjectivity, lived experience, and meaning through polyvocal, tangible, and intangible fragments uncovered within and beyond the interior in question.

The narrations within this panel challenged the value of a collective range of creative explorations in revealing each interior's memory repository. Employing the use of physical archival materials, digital making, written historical narrative, quotation and image relationships, and readings of imagined perspectives, unique perspectives were presented. These approaches sought to expose and represent individuals' emotional meanings and memories to encourage a holistic positioning of the selected interior spaces [Fig 06.].

These diverse, imagined perspectives were discussed, endorsing the necessity of layered, plural techniques to extrapolate valuable insights into lived human experience by creating new meanings for spaces through lost voices and imagined experiences. While encountering the interior by re-defining the space digitally to re-reading a biographical script, the interior can be defined best through the overlapping of these distinct counter-narratives. By combining the layers of narration through the diverse voices and techniques of the researcher with past inhabitants, we can come closer to re-imagining the interior and the life it has lived.



Figure 06.
Photograph: Kashish Goel, 2025.

exhibition

Once the images had been selected for the exhibition, the conference committee discussed the curation of these within the historic Sculpture Court at the heart of Edinburgh College of Art. Early on the Committee agreed to avoid the obvious division of elements by purely digital and analogue format. As with the panels, connections between the images were clear on multiple levels. We considered the design of the exhibition to be focused on the best way for visitors to engage with the elements and curate their own journey. To facilitate this, we concluded that parity in format was key, with all printed images at A1 size and all moving images on the same size screen. As with the conference, connections between images could be made in different ways, both by interpreting context and production method [Fig 07. and Fig 08.].

Exhibitions of interiors and architecture are intriguing in that generally what you are exhibiting is not the existing space but a facsimile of it, usually at a different scale, and, in the case of photographs, through the eye of the photographer. You are also presenting, as academic Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen describes, 'an act of displacement from its original and temporal context.'[24] In today's world we are bombarded by images of spaces, both real and imaged, daily through social media and other digital platforms. We have not stopped engaging with real spaces, but we have become overwhelmed by the breadth of access we have to interiors we have never and may never visit. That is not to dismiss the digital and imagined, but this conference sought to set a common platform within its exhibition element in which to engage physically with all types of interior images.

The exhibition ran in tandem with the presentations and formed the hub of the social interactions between panels. Some panel presenters had images in the exhibition, but most contributors were showing exclusively in the exhibition. The work varied from details of existing interiors to fantastical digitally generated imagined interiors, and many other options in between. Each contributor supplied a short abstract explaining their work and this was set next to each piece. We used a very simple setup of trestle tables and modular metal display system to form an open landscape of images throughout the sculpture court. The location meant that for its duration it would be seen by all staff, students, and visitors in the building as well. The nature of the space also dictated that set up and take down were required to be done in three hours. All printed images were displayed in black frames laid angled from the tabletops on two pieces of standard timber, coloured with tape to match the conference colours. As this exhibition was also visible from the main floor of the sculpture court and the balcony above, it was important that the system had visual impact and consistency, without overpowering the various images on display. Digital pieces were provided with headphones where necessary to allow the audios to be enjoyed without distraction.

We found that as the conference unfolded people began to revisit works on display, engage with the creators who were present, and use them as starting points for developing conversations around the ideas of the imagined and imaged interior. A selection of these images have been explored in the visual essay that weaves its way through the other contributions of this special issue. We have considered them under the three headings of 'Image as Moment', 'Image as Host', and 'Image Between Imagination and Memory.'



Figure 07.
Photograph: Vanshikha Chopra, 2025.



Figure 08.
Photograph: Emily Wilson, 2025.

keynotes

On both days of the conference the keynotes of architectural photographer Hélène Binet and academic Sophia Psarra provided conclusions that developed themes discussed. They were chosen for their complementary approaches through the images as both object and narrative. Binet's absorbing photographs of projects by architects including Sigurd Lewerentz, Jørn Utzo, and Peter Zumthor immersed us in these spaces through her eyes. Her attention to the reading and composing of space through photography brought us directly into contact with light and materials and their critical role in creating an interior. In her heavily image-focused lecture, she shared her view of familiar and unfamiliar interiors throughout the world. We became acutely aware that within her work what has been described as the understanding that 'in the search for the "perfect" composition one sacrifices a certain amount of personal expression' and that what interests her was 'not only the photographic representation but also investigation.'[25] We are seeing these building through her eyes only once she has absorbed the spaces. A valuable lesson on patience was provided to make us think about how we engage with interiors to really understand them. Our initial focus may have been on content and process, but engagement with time is equally important and often overlooked [Fig 09.].

Psarra concluded the conference by taking us on a journey of the narrative life of interiors, from the page to space. Using the four texts of Jorge Luis Borges' *Fictions* (1944), Italo Calvino's *Cosmicomics* (1965) and *Invisible Cities* (1972), and Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980), she explored how what is written becomes real through the process of narrative and diagram. In particular, the role of the labyrinth was explored both as image and form of writing. In the lecture she investigated how meaning is advanced through this process [Fig 10.]. Among questions she explored she asked: What role does this form of mapping play in knowledge translation? And can coherence and meaning be extended in symbolic form? By considering the interaction between architecture and literature, she looked at how myth, language, and art shapes and perceives how we experience a work . The inclusion of selected historic images of chosen interiors and diagrams of her own analysis process developed our understanding of her process of interior analysis. In this way we were able to make connections back to both narrative and imagery within the panels and how these were equally part of the process and outcome of imagining interiors. What Psarra drew out was the importance of individual approach and sensibilities in the overall process of imagining and representing interiors.



Figure 09.
Photograph: Dave Loder, 2025.

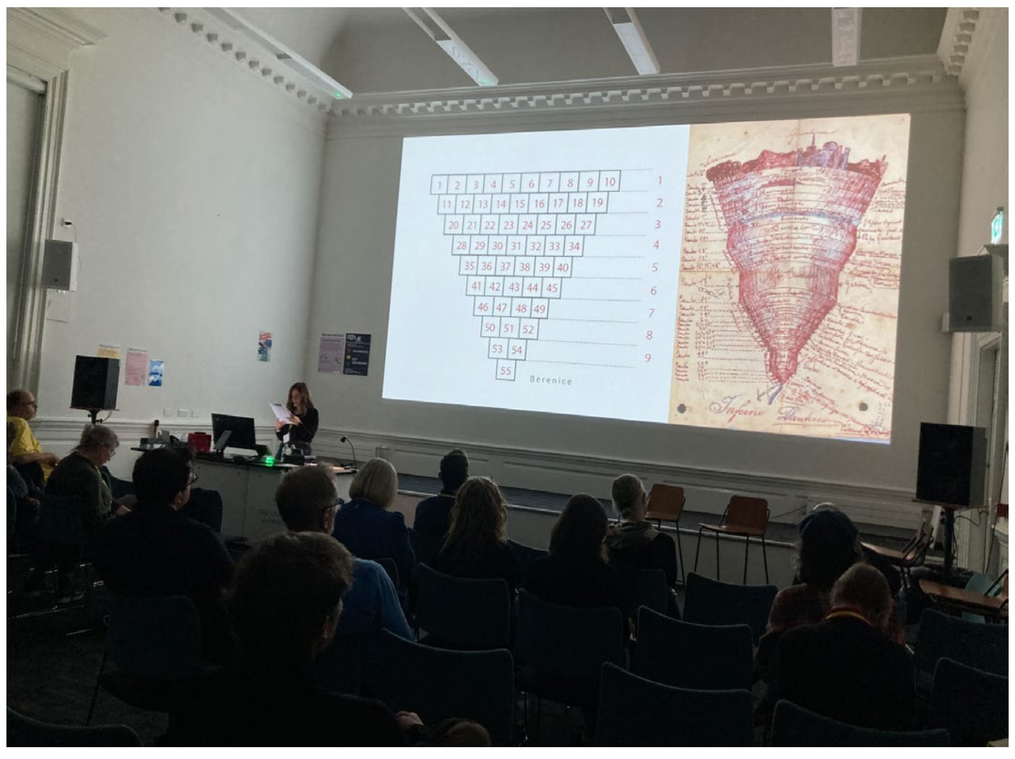

Figure 10.
Photograph: Rachel Simmonds, 2025.

outcome

The conference provided time for reflection and discussion around what Rice would describe as the interactions between the interior as space and as image in various forms.[26] To this the narrative of process, presentation, and reflections was added. In her book *Architecture and Narrative Psarra* notes, in relation to narrative, that it,

> [...] requires a narrator and a reader in the same way in which architecture requires an architect and a viewer. A narrative, therefore, is not only the content of the story that is narrated, or the way in which it is interpreted by reader, but also the way in which it is structured and presented to an audience by an authorial entity, a writer, a film-maker, an architect or the curator of an exhibitions.[27]

The international nature of the conference contributors developed this beyond our own boundaries, bringing lived experiences from different cultures into the frame [Fig 11.]. Who the interiors are/were for also played a part. A lived experience of a space versus an academic interpretation of it are very different things. It is also interesting to consider why, as current-day academics, we are drawn to interiors from the past, often in locations to which we have no personal links. What became clear within the context of

this conference is that, within the interior community, the experience of being a designer and not just an academic becomes important in many cases to what is driving our need to explore and explain our world, not just in words but in images too.

The wide age demographic of the conference allowed us varied perspectives on spaces and ideas, often with technology being a bridge to explore spaces in different ways between generations. The student–teacher perspective also played a part, with students presenting ideas, and ideas being presented about learning and teaching. Considering it from the learners' perspective opens new opportunities for us as academics to explore technology within the dissemination of interior ideas.

Equally, time spent with archive information on historic interiors allows for a connection to the past that cannot be replicated through newly formed versions of these spaces. We considered how we as academics interpret this, along with ways of representing these interiors. By considering the engagement with existing and emerging technologies, we discussed the role of the archive in both a historical and future context.

The background to the papers also raised an interesting thread around the process of research. We are all too often focused on the outcome of research, but, in several of the talks, it was the process that created the result that garnered as many answers. In a sense the process of imagining interiors was a free takeaway for all, considering how they may evolve their process of investigations as well as the presentation of the outcome.

In relation to the exhibition, it became for its short existence an interior of its own. Not imagined but created from the imagination of all the contributors and delegates. These thoughts formed conversations that stirred ideas and thoughts that were shared. The conference and exhibition were both photographed to form their own interior legacy of the events and the spaces that held them. A selection of these images are included at the end of this Editorial Introduction.



Figure 11.
Photograph: Dean Chalmers, 2025.

conclusion

As John Berger notes,

> [...] images were first made to conjure up the appearance of something that was absent. Gradually it became evident that an image could outlast what it represented, it then showed how something or someone had once looked – and thus by implication how the subject had once been seen by other people.[28]

This summarises succinctly the outcome of the conference. Our eyes and ears were opened to images and narratives of others about the interiors. Within the interior spaces in which the conference occurred, people were encouraged to think and share their ideas. We looked beyond just representing an interior that already existed; rather, we explored existing images as well as creating new ones. The narrative, process, and solution are all inextricably intertwined and come from our own representation of ideas and process linked to others' interpretation of that system.

This conference did not aim to define an answer to the question ‘what is the imagined interior?’ Indeed, as it proceeded it raised more questions, and that became key in its success. Interiors are for people, and within our investigations through different imaging media into the interior tectonics of various spaces, we traversed this through the lenses of others. This understanding in turn leads to a greater connection to these spaces. It became clear that the analogue and the digital, the historic and the contemporary are not two sides of a debate; rather, they are eternally connected. This conference sought to encourage the development of this intertwining. Our decision to have attendance in person only, with no recording or online engagement, focused the ideas and discussion to the group of 100 or so attendees. Only social media transmitted images of the conference to the wider world. We found this to be a positive approach, allowing those involved to focus on the discussions with those visible to them, in an interior not imagined but real.

The following papers and visual essay will expand upon some of the themes covered in the conference, exposing within the Special Issue an image of the interior as explored, presented, exhibited, and discussed by the international group of academics and practitioners involved in the Interior Educators 2026 Conference Imagining Interiors. We hope that in now exposing this further through this Special Edition *Idea Journal* to you, the wider interiors community, it provokes ideas in your way of thinking, producing, and presenting ideas around the interior through images in various formats.

acknowledgements

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author biographies

Ed Hollis

University of Edinburgh

0000-0002-5160-6286

After an early career in Architecture Ed entered academica in 1999 and was professor of interior design at Edinburgh College of Art at the University of Edinburgh from 2016-2026. His research uses storytelling and drawing to explore the themes of adaptation and loss in historic interiors.

Rachel Simmonds

University of Edinburgh

0000-0002-0477-4797

Rachel Simmonds practiced as an architect and conservation architect before becoming a full time academic at Edinburgh College of Art at the University of Edinburgh in 2015. She uses archival photographic methods to research the exhibition design practice of the Aalto atelier.

imagining interiors 2025 — conference images

















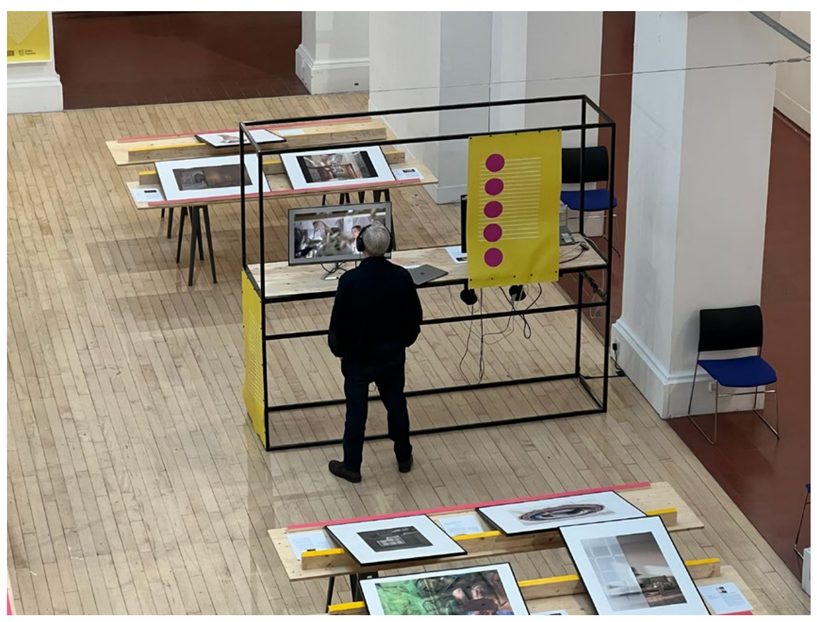

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seeing double: reflections on an unrealised interior

Shaun Young
Northumbria University
0009-0007-8158-937X

abstract

The subject of this essay is the author's unrealised proposal for a temporary interior installation commemorating the return of a historic archive to Croome Court — a neo-Palladian house in a landscape garden of international significance near Worcester, UK. The proposed Archive Rooms installation would transform a suite of uninhabited spaces on the first floor of the house into a stimulating setting for exhibitions of artefacts from the returning collection. The design project was originally undertaken as part of the author's practice-led doctoral inquiry exploring potential contemporary applications of picturesque concepts, techniques, and strategies in architectural design. The proposal was informed by the interior design techniques of one of Croome's principal designers, the architect Robert Adam (1728–1792), whose contribution to the development of the picturesque in the eighteenth century remains only partially articulated.

The essay reflects on the proposal through the lens of a series of perceived doublenesses in the project, delimiting latent spaces of potentiality for imagining new interiors between research and proposition, past and future, representation and reality, stasis and movement. Oscillating between historical-interpretative research into the work of Adam, descriptions of unrealised design proposals, and critical commentary on the design-led research methodology employed by the author, the essay elucidates often overlooked elements of Adam's interior design practice and situates them in the context of eighteenth-century discourse on the picturesque. It reveals esoteric and forgotten ways of designing and representing interiors that have potential utility in contemporary design. It also suggests foundational methodological strategies for future historically informed and propositionally oriented design-led research inquiries in the field.

keywords

Robert Adam; picturesque; interior architecture; design-led research; methodology

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Shaun Young, 'Seeing Double: Reflections on an Unrealised Interior', *Idea Journal*, 23.2 (2026), pp. 27–43, doi.org/10.37113/ij.v23i2.647.

introduction

The subject of this essay is the author's unrealised proposal for the National Trust's 'Croome Redefined: Archive Rooms' design competition. Designers were invited to make proposals for a temporary interior installation to commemorate the return of a historic archive to Croome Court — a neo-Palladian house in a landscape garden of international significance in Pershore, UK. Both the garden and the exterior of the house are the work of landscape architect Lancelot 'Capability' Brown (1716–1783). The architect Robert Adam (1728–1792) designed several key interiors, including the Long Gallery, Tapestry Room, and Library. The aim of the Archive Rooms project was to transform a suite of spaces on the first floor of the house into a stimulating setting for exhibitions of artefacts from the returning collection. The budget was modest and, due to the building's historical importance, any proposed intervention had to be fully reversible.

The design project was carried out as part of the author's practice-led doctoral research exploring potential contemporary applications of the picturesque in architecture.[1] Both of Croome's principal designers, Brown and Adam, are important figures in the history of the picturesque. While Brown's role is extensively discussed and debated in the existing literature, the significance of Adam's contribution is less well defined. The author's proposal for the Archive Rooms was informed by Adam's practice. In the context of the design competition, this fulfilled the National Trust's requirement for a contemporary installation that established a dialogue with the estate's past. In the context of the author's doctoral inquiry, it provided an opportunity to explore Adam's contribution to the picturesque through both historical research and the propositional activity of design.

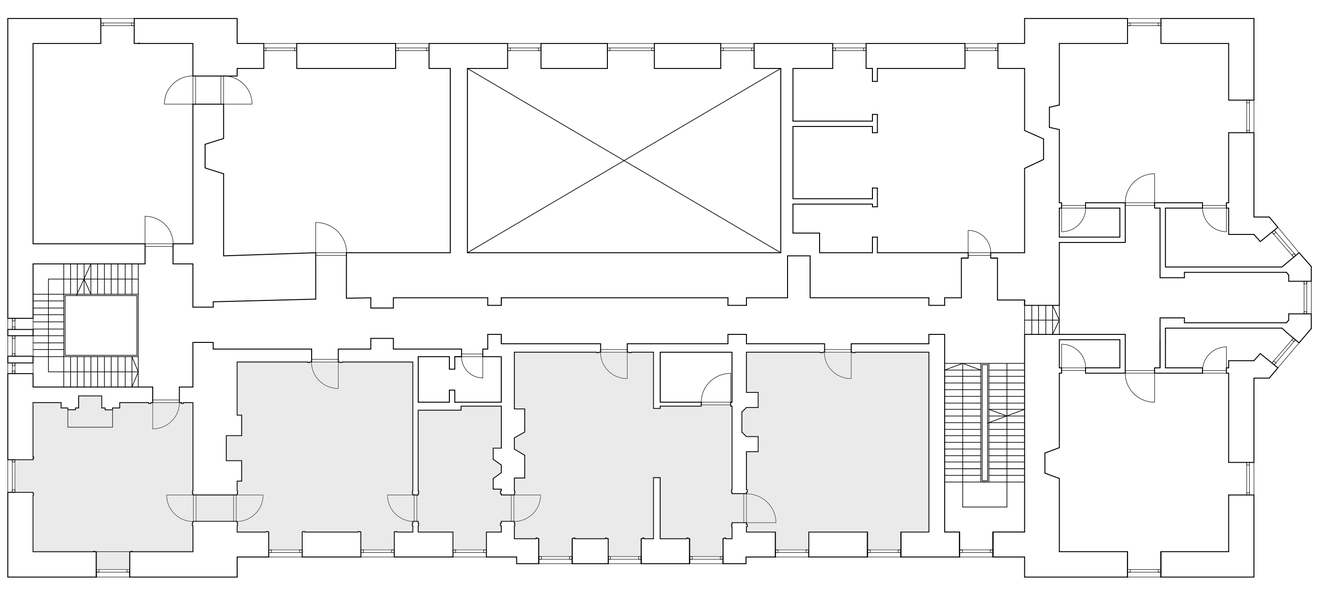

Figure 01.
Plan of the first floor at Croome Court as existing. The proposed location of the Archive Rooms shown in grey. Drawing by the author.

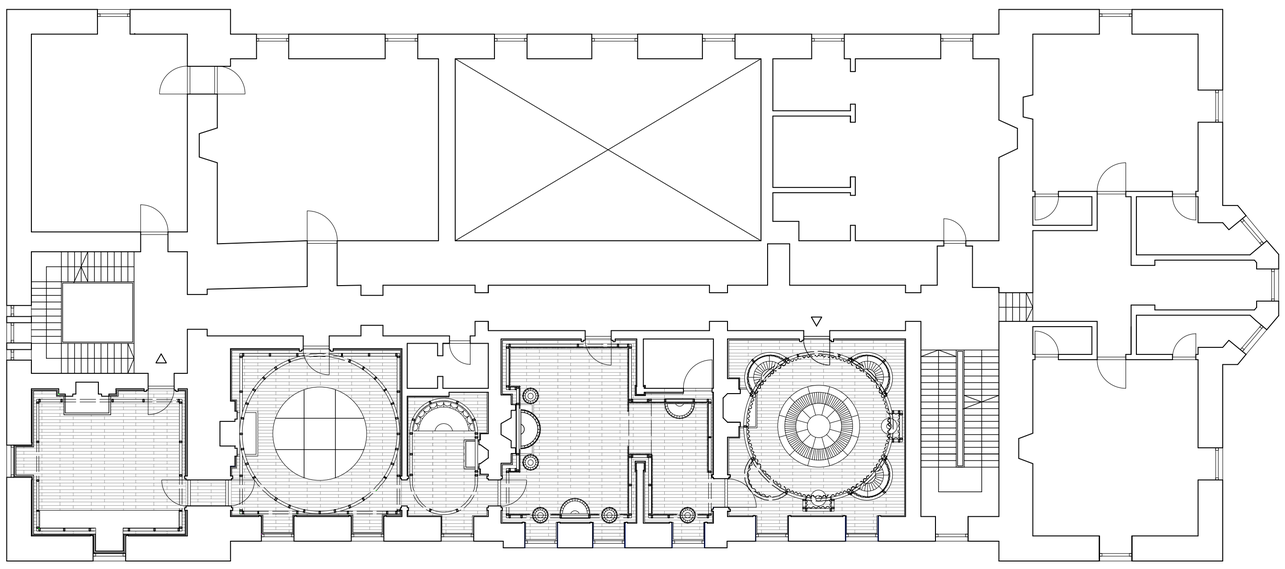

Figure 02.
Plan of the first floor at Croome Court as proposed. Drawing by the author.

While modest in scale and humble in its proposed method of construction, the proposal was, like an Adam interior, dense with ideas. It aimed to provide a rich, varied, and bespoke architectural setting with manifold curatorial possibilities to ensure an ever-changing visitor experience. The installation was to be located in a sequence of interconnected first-floor rooms with views across the landscape [Fig. 01]. At the time of the competition, the rooms were in a state of neglect, left largely untouched since the National Trust added the house to its portfolio in 2007. The author proposed a free-standing, light touch installation, which would have no invasive fixings back to the existing building. A series of self-supporting timber studwork frames would be installed to dramatically (albeit temporarily) alter the texture of the first-floor plan [Fig. 02]. Frames based on square, circular, oval, and rectangular plans would impose new, 'pure' geometrical overlays to change the shape and form of each individual room in the sequence. This would represent a reenactment of the relatively inexpensive 'boxing-out' strategies used by Adam to dramatically but economically reconfigure the form of country house interiors.[2] The design and composition of the studwork frames was informed by the features and underlying proportions of the existing rooms. This proposed new 'layer of construction' would be low-tech and low cost. Frames would be joined together using simple, robust mechanical fixings and painted with a layer of thinned white emulsion to rhyme with the existing joinery and mouldings. At strategic points in the sequence, sheets of aluminium would be installed to structurally reinforce the studwork and provide mirror-like vertical surfaces equivalent to the pier glasses used by Adam to create the illusion of spatial extension.

As in an Adam interior, each room was conceived as 'its own little empire of activity, allusions, and colour' [Fig. 03].[3] To enclose the frames, fabric wall linings of varying tone, thickness, and opacity would be fixed back to the studwork. Linings

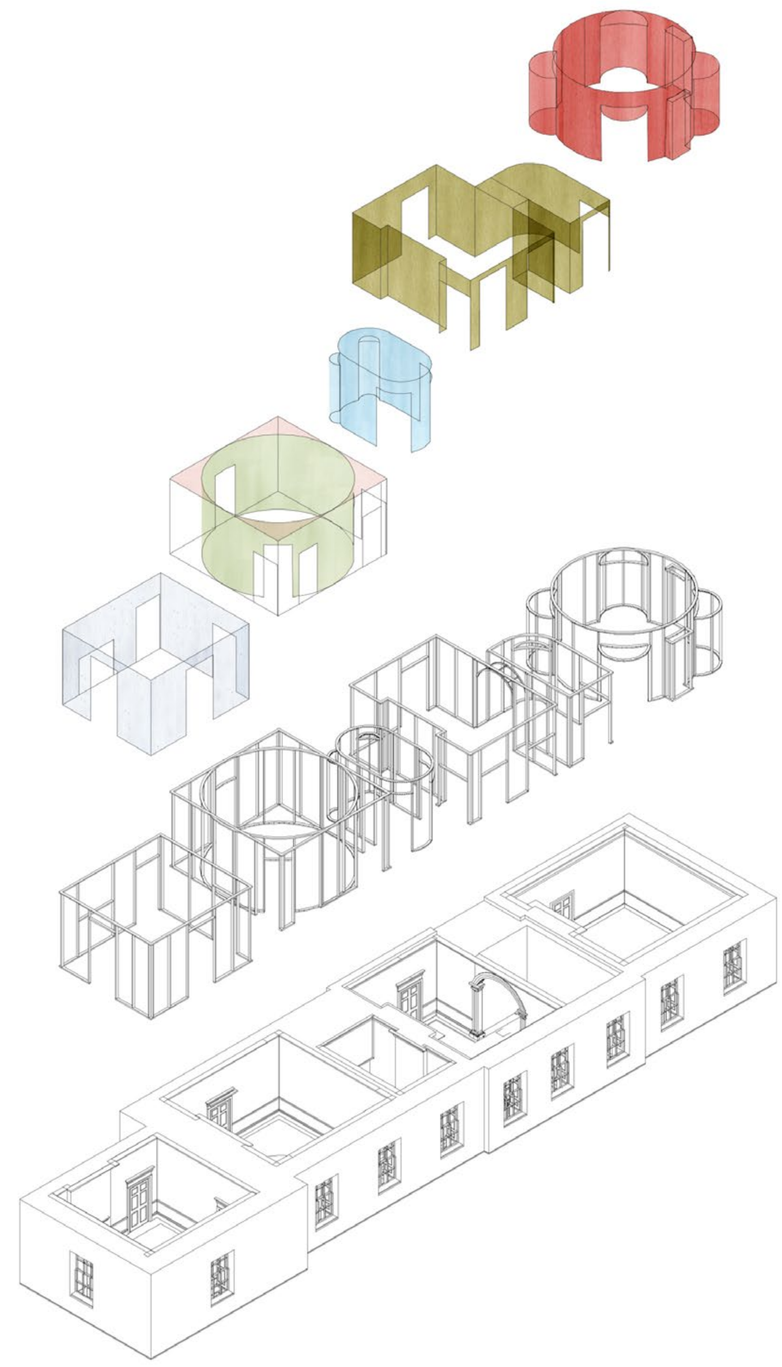

Figure 03.
Exploded isometric drawing describing the author's design strategy for the Archive Rooms installation. Drawing by the author.

would range from deep and three-dimensional ('architectonic') to flat and two-dimensional ('picturesque').[4] Fabric linings in the first room in the sequence were to be hung theatrically and gathered like curtains — a reference to the heavily modulated wall treatments typically used by Adam in entrance halls. The final room in the sequence was to have wall panel and ceiling designs by Adam printed and hand-drawn onto its surface, giving the interior the appearance and pictorial flatness of a drawing. In this sense, the proposed installation would make use of Adam's whole decorative scale, with linings becoming gradually more attenuated as the spatial sequence unfolded.[5] Much like in an Adam interior, furniture was considered an integral component in the overall decorative scheme. A series of bespoke but low-cost furniture pieces was designed for each room, providing a range of options for the display of artefacts.

The following discussion reflects on the author's Archive Rooms project. It elucidates often overlooked elements of Adam's interior design practice and situates them in the context of the eighteenth-century discourse on the picturesque. It reveals esoteric and forgotten ways of designing and representing interiors that have potential utility in contemporary design. It suggests foundational methodological strategies for future historically informed and propositionally oriented design-led research inquiries in the field, and, ultimately, delimits latent spaces of potentiality for imagining new interiors. The discussion is organised under the headings 'research and proposition', 'past and future', 'stasis and movement', and 'representation and reality', with each section exploring a perceived doubleness or productive dialectic in the project.

research and proposition

Adam's approach to design was underpinned by a propositional way of apprehending history and conducting historical research. In 1764, alongside fellow architect and artist Charles-Louis Clérisseau (1721–1820), Adam published *Ruins of the Palace of the Emperor Diocletian at Spalatro* (*The Ruins*) — a survey of Diocletian's Palace (293 AD) in Split.[6] The publication included a novel combination of detailed orthographic drawings of the palace, including studies of its bespoke architectural orders and perspective views of the serendipitous spatial conditions that had emerged over time as the building had fallen into ruin. Adam's survey combined the precision of earlier, similar works with the theatrical compositional quality and propositional intent characteristic of the work of his mentor in Rome, the archeologist, artist, and architect Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720–1778).[7] Piranesi's work demonstrated how surveying ruins in their found condition could inform the development of new architectural ideas.[8] Like Piranesi, when making perspective views of the ruins at Split, Adam did so with an 'artist's eye.'[9] The 'neutral reportage' of previous surveys was replaced by a more painterly, pictorial, and propositional mode of depiction focused on extracting ideas for use in future architectural commissions.[10] This propositional attitude to historical research informed Adam's subsequent approach to design, including his characteristically idiosyncratic, imaginative, and innovative treatment of architectural orders and his spatially ambitious and materially elaborate proposals for country house interiors.[11]

Underlying the author's approach to design research is a similarly propositional attitude to history and historical research. Here, the historical subject is not only explored as a curiosity from the past, but also as the source of ideas with potential applicative value in the present. Architectural history is not looked at with nostalgia or contempt, but rather as a source of concepts, techniques, and strategies with great contemporary value if sharpened against the exigencies of the present and critically re-appropriated.

At the start of the Archive Rooms project, the author carried out a literature review into Adam's practice. Focusing on his designs for country house interiors, the review revealed a significant amount of textual and visual information — primary and secondary sources dating back to the mid-eighteenth century. Due to limitations with the traditional text-based literature review and the propositionally oriented aims of the research, visual methods were adopted to represent the findings. Interiors by Adam were visually mapped in the form of a large-scale wall chart [Fig. 04]. Diverse visual sources (drawings and photographs) were brought together for the first time on a single continuous surface, systematically revealing Adam's interior design techniques and enabling hitherto unseen relationships between projects to emerge. Textual references were used in a supporting role, inverting the usual hierarchies of historical research in the field.

In the wall chart, information was structured in a way befitting the 'Adam style', which was characterised by 'the sub-division of parts and the sub-enrichment



Figure 04.
Wall chart mapping of Adam's projects for the renovation of country house interiors. Composite wall chart arranged by the author. Some images redacted due to copyright restrictions. Any photographs shown are the author's own.

of elements', with 'the whole' a careful composition of 'elements of singular grace and expression."[12] Projects were mapped chronologically in order to understand how Adam's conception of the interior had changed over time. Each project was allocated a column in the chart. Within the columns, a row was dedicated to every room in the house designed by Adam. Rows contained visual information and textual references organised under the headings 'walls', 'floors', 'ceilings', 'furnishing', and 'colour' to provide a description of the constituent parts of each space and outline the ways in which they were brought together by Adam to form a variegated compositional whole.

At Croome, the task was to design a sequence of rooms in succession. Alongside the visual mapping of information revealed by the initial literature review, drawn research was carried out into three of Adam's most complete and elaborate interiors. The wall chart was expanded to include isometric drawings of Syon House (1761–1767), Osterley Park (1761–1780), and Newby Hall (1767–1776), which explored Adam's strategies for designing individual rooms and sequences of rooms experienced in series [Fig. 05].

Subsequently, the wall chart was further expanded to incorporate the author's design sketches, which freely speculated on how techniques used by Adam (revealed by the visual mapping) could inform design proposals for the Archive Rooms installation at Croome [Fig. 06]. In methodological terms, this slight innovation dissolves the space between historical research and design. It articulates an important moment of translation from precedent analysis to proposition that usually remains tacit in the design process and serves to propositionally reorient initial historical research.

This systematic and expanded mapping of the findings of the literature review using visual and inscriptive methods revealed what might be described as a taxonomy of techniques used by Adam to design country house interiors. In research terms, the chart can be understood as a novel contribution to knowledge. It is a visual equivalent to existing text-based literature reviews on the work of Adam. It brings previously disparate visual and textual sources together on a single surface for the first time, facilitating cognitive acts by means of visual praxis, such as sensemaking and novel intertextual readings in ways that more traditional



Figure 05.
Expanded wall chart mapping incorporated isometric drawings of Adam's most complete and elaborate interiors: Syon House, Osterley Park, and Newby Hall. Composite wall chart and drawings by the author. Some images redacted due to copyright restrictions. Any photographs and drawings shown are the author's own.

approaches do not readily permit.[13] In this way, the wall chart reveals new areas for future historical research and, perhaps more importantly in the context of this design-led inquiry, brings information together in a way that is generative of new design ideas. For the author, the wall chart is not a benign academic representation of an overlooked aspect of Adam's practice, but a design framework — a repertoire of concepts, techniques, and strategies for imagining new interiors.

This closeness between research and proposition is reflected in the author's design proposals, which possess something of a temporal ambiguity. When looking at the final drawings, for instance, it is difficult to discern whether what is depicted is a reflection of the past or a projection of the future, and whether the interior that is represented is a proposal for the historical reconstruction of an existing room or a proposal for a new room inculcated with historical ideas.

past and future

Design proposals were developed through an iterative dialogue between sketching and layered drawings made using pencil and watercolour transparencies [Fig. 07]. As established in the previous section, sketches were used to extract historical techniques from Adam's repertoire and freely speculate on how they might be used to generate new interior conditions. These sketch proposals — energetic projections of the future

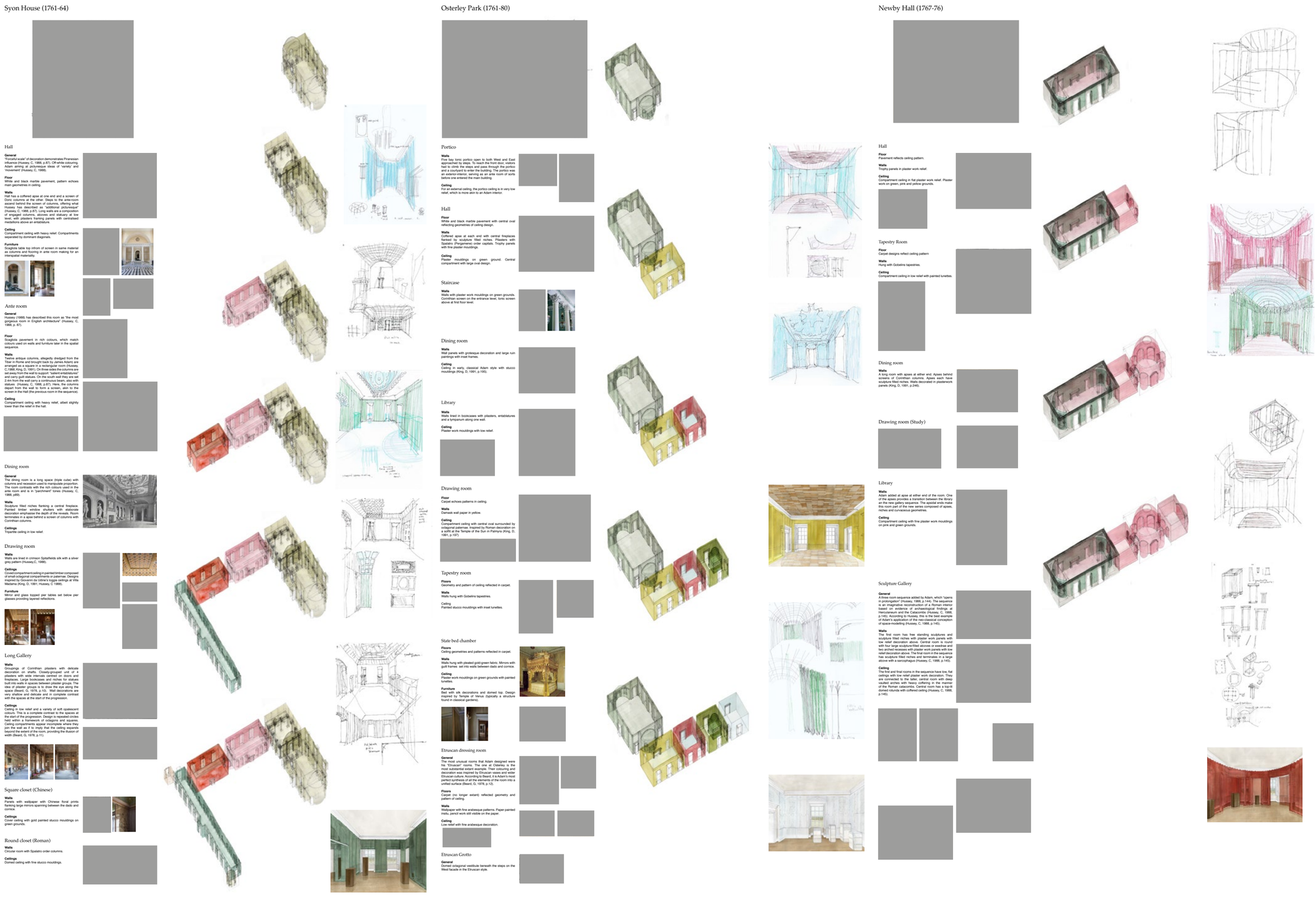

Figure 06.
Expanded wall chart mapping incorporating design development sketches. Composite wall chart and sketches by the author. Some images redacted due to copyright restrictions. Any photographs and drawings shown are the author's own.

made from found fragments of the past — were tested and developed further through large-scale measured perspective drawings comprising pencil and watercolour proposals laid over detailed drawings of the existing rooms. Here, ideas from the past were sharpened against the exigencies of the present to draw out and intensify the characteristics and latent qualities of the existing spaces.

This iterative testing process, carried out through drawing, resulted in an intense and variegated sequence of new rooms constructed from reconstituted and re-appropriated historical ideas drawn from Adam's practice.

The first room in the proposed Archive Rooms sequence is the Red Room [Fig. 08]. Its design draws inspiration from the central rotunda in the sculpture gallery at Newby Hall. A new circular enclosure is constructed within the almost-square, rectangular plan of the existing room, rationalising the base geometry. The walls are lined in curtains coloured to match the crimson red background of the Gobelins carpets once installed in the Adam-designed Tapestry Room on the ground floor at Croome.[14] In reference to the heavily articulated, 'architectonic' wall decoration characteristic of Adam's designs for halls and ante rooms at the start of a spatial sequence, the translucent fabric is hung to gather in deep folds. A drawing of the domed ceiling in the rotunda gallery at Newby Hall is printed onto white fabric and stretched across the top of the studwork frame to form a false ceiling. Even though the domed space is represented on a

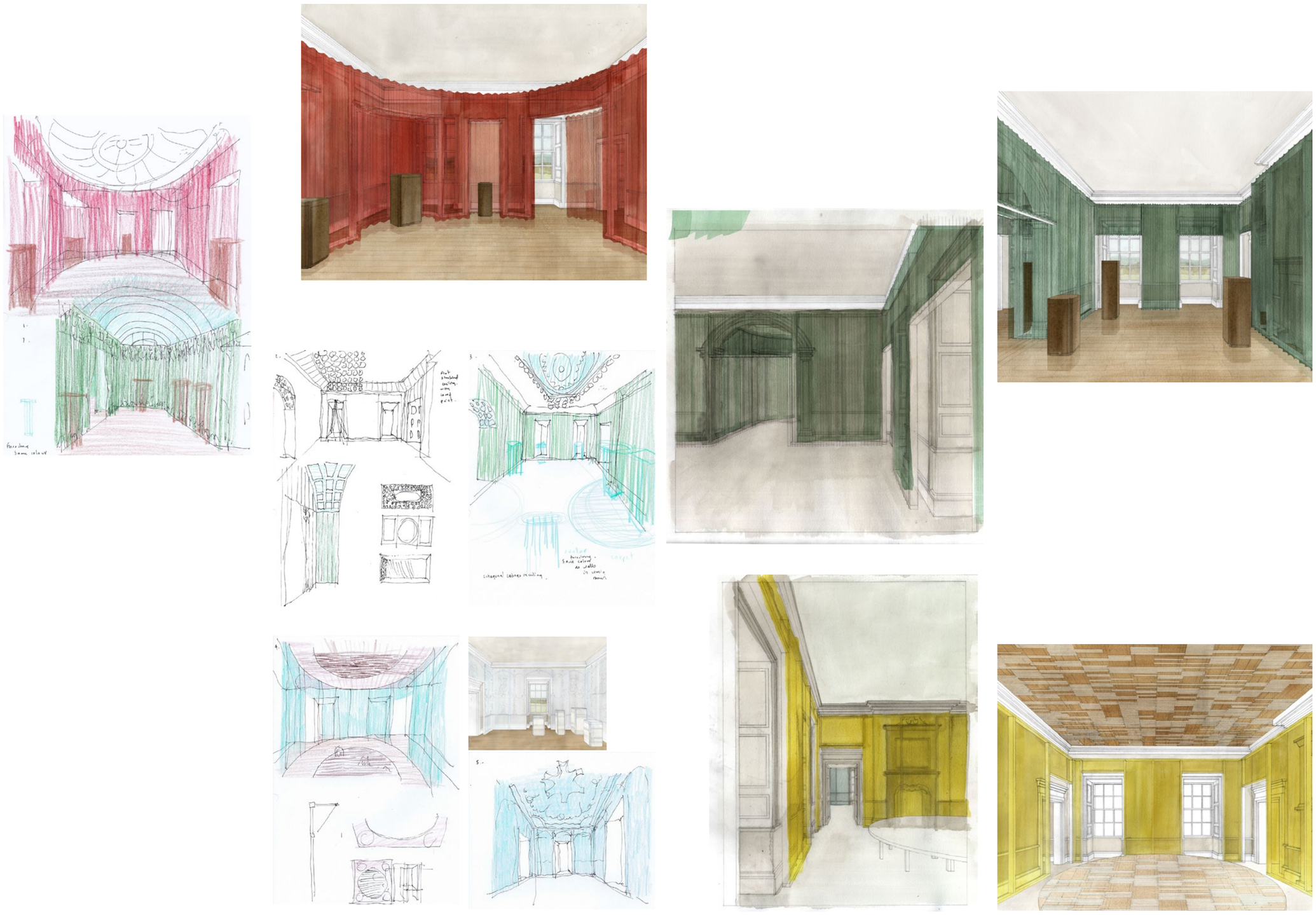

Figure 07.
Process sheet charting the iterative development of the proposed Archive Rooms interiors at Croome Court. Sketches and drawings by the author.

flat surface, the suggestion of concavity is enough to give the feeling of a rounding towards the centre of the room. This is a technique used by Adam in his ceiling design for the dining room at Moccas Park (1781), which has a raised central circular compartment to evoke a sense of the domed construction that he would have ideally realised in its place had the existing architecture and budget allowed. Around the perimeter of the room, walls are punctuated by semicircular niches and narrow rectangular recesses calling to mind the sculpture-filled niches in the Long Gallery on the ground floor at Croome, the dining room at Syon, and the hall at Harewood House (1765–1769). Rather than statuary, the plinths standing in the niches display archival material. Plywood plinth tops have a routed pattern — a continuation of the network of lines radiating from the centre of the circle in the ceiling design. In this sense, the furniture partakes in the geometric network of lines that bind the room together. On the floor is a low-lying timber console for the display of artefacts. A pattern composed of circular motifs is routed into the top of the console, which, as customary of Adam-designed carpets and pavements, reflects the design of the ceiling. The console is varnished in a shade similar to the existing floorboards to emphasise its belonging to the floor.

Passing through a red curtain and an existing white-painted timber-lined reveal, the visitor enters the next room in the sequence — the Green Bedroom [Fig. 09]. The room's name references Adam's original design for the space, which featured walls



Figure 08.
Perspective view of the proposed Red Room. Mixed media drawing by the author.



Figure 09.
Perspective view of the proposed Green Bedroom. Mixed media drawing by the author.

lined in green paper and a domed bed upholstered in green fabric.[15] The pleated, acid-green wall linings and pale green ceiling evoke both Adam's original decorative scheme for the room and the State Bed Chamber at Osterley Park. Wall linings are slightly more attenuated than those in the Red Room. Fabric is draped dramatically in a triangular tent-like form over window and door openings, significantly altering the character of the existing room and recalling the dramatic drapery of the bed, designed by Adam, which once stood in the space. A reflected ceiling plan of a tripartite design by Adam is printed onto the false ceiling. The space beneath is notionally divided into three sections, each housing a small ensemble of display furniture.

After moving through a rectangular ante room with two semicircular ends and wall linings in a blue fabric matching the topaz blue of the boudoir-vestibule to the Bed Chamber at Kedleston Hall (1760–1768) [Fig. 10], the visitor enters the penultimate space in the sequence — the Drawing Room [Fig. 11]. The overall plan-from is circle-in-square with a circular stud work frame standing within a larger square one. The room is entered via a small interstitial space between the two layers of framing, recalling the transitions between rooms in an Adam interior through exotically shaped *poche*. The walls are lined in a translucent pale green fabric that is stretched



Figure 10.
Perspective view of the proposed Ante Room. Mixed media drawing by the author.



Figure 11.
Perspective view of the proposed Drawing Room. Mixed media drawing by the author.

taut. The ceiling is in pink translucent fabric with a missing circular section in its centre to frame an exposed timber lathe ceiling above. Pale green and pink were colours commonly used by Adam to contrast the full-bodied tones of rooms elsewhere in a sequence.[16] A reflected ceiling plan of Adam's Music Room at Home House (1777) is printed onto the wall and ceiling linings. The design is carefully reconfigured to ensure the circular pattern joins seamlessly at the junction between wall and ceiling and continues uninterrupted around the whole surface of the interior, enveloping the visitor in an all-encompassing meshwork of circular motifs. In the centre of the room is a large circular table with a sheet aluminium top. The table conceals a jacuzzi bathtub installed by the property developer who owned the house in the 1990s.[17] By reflecting the exposed timber lathe work of the ceiling above, the table fulfils the role of a carpet in an Adam interior, albeit in a slightly subversive way.

Finally, the visitor arrives in the Etruscan Room [Fig. 12]. The walls and ceiling are in pale pastel blue translucent canvas-like fabric, which is stretched taut across the frames. The blue matches the tone of the grounds used by Adam in his decorative scheme for the walls in the Etruscan Room at Osterley Park (1773–1774). Unrealised sketch designs for panels in the Etruscan style by Adam are drawn back onto the wall surfaces in pencil, evoking the hand-drawn outlines that remain partly visible on the walls at Osterley. In this way, the room takes on the qualities of a drawing and a pictorial flatness — a stark contrast to the more 'architectonic' wall treatments at the start of the sequence. The only piece of furniture is a table running the entire length of one of the walls. Its design draws inspiration from an unrealised proposal for a continuous table around the room's perimeter by Adam. An existing black, grey, and white marble fireplace is framed by the new installation and becomes an integral part of the composition.



Figure 12.
Perspective view of the proposed Etruscan Room. Mixed media drawing by the author.

representation and reality

Much like an Adam interior, the author's Archive Rooms proposal has drawing-like qualities insofar as there is a closeness between what is represented and the mode of representation. Upon reflection, the proposed installation can be understood, conceptually, as a suite of 'Drawing Rooms.'

The act of drawing was central to Adam's practice. Rather than a means to an end, it was the principal method through which he theorised and developed

his idiosyncratic conception of architecture and the interior.[18] As we have already established, from early in his career there was a bifurcation in Adam's thinking. On the one hand, he was committed to developing an idiosyncratic, eclectic mode of classicism. On the other, he was drawn to the picturesque. While the productive tension between the two only gradually became apparent in his built work, it is clear from his prodigious drawn output that it had fuelled his architectural imagination from the earliest stages of his education.[19] Indeed, from the beginning, Adam developed both lines of inquiry through parallel drawing practices. He made studious two-dimensional orthographic projections of ancient and Renaissance architecture to develop a fundamental understanding of the classical idiom that would provide the bedrock of his style. In tandem he produced more fanciful and speculative perspectival drawings — ink and watercolour 'inventions' — exploring picturesque preoccupations, specifically, the relationship between architecture and landscape.[20] While these two strands of Adam's practice began to intermingle in the drawings published in *The Ruins*, it was in *The Works in Architecture* (*The Works*) that they overlapped most meaningfully.[21] The publication contains a visually stunning sequence of engravings — an admixture of orthographic projections (plans and elevations), dramatic perspectival views, and rendered section drawings incorporating perspective elements to demonstrate depth and offer glimpses into interior spaces subsequent to the room bisected by the section plane.[22] Presented in an unfolding sequence that serves to illustrate Adam's evolving architectural vision across scales, the plates take the viewer on a journey from exterior to interior, and from overview to detail, inculcating the publication with the kind of 'movement' he sought in the architectural works depicted. In this sense, *The Works* not only represented the realisation of a picturesque-inflected neoclassicist architectural sensibility, but also a distinctive technique for representing it that was 'both explanatory and evocative.'[23]

As the author's Archive Rooms proposal was never realised it remains an imagined interior, represented in its most complete and ideal form by drawings. The final composite drawing of the proposal [Fig. 13] was made using techniques like those developed by Adam (in *The Works*) and other eighteenth-century practitioners at a moment of uncertainly and innovation in the conception, design, and representation of interiors.[24] Two types of projection — plan and perspective — are rather abruptly brought together to form something of a hybrid mode of representation that seeks to explain the proposal in a holistic and evocative way. Single point perspective drawings of each room are framed by the outline of the floor plan, which doubles to serve as the section cut line from which the perspective view is taken. The different modes of projection collude in an attempt at something filmic and kinetic with the eye invited to trace a path through the varied and elaborate interior sequence in a way that is representative of a projected future reality.

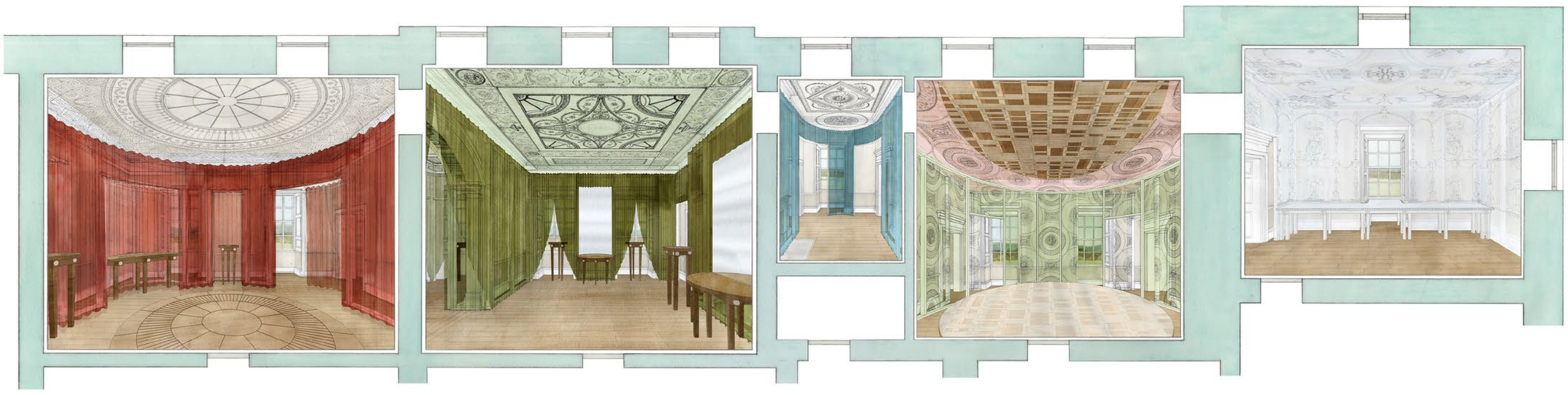

Figure 13.
Final composite drawing (plan and perspective) of the proposed Archive Rooms installation. Mixed media drawing by the author.

Modes of representation used by the author throughout the project were informed by historical research, which revealed a curious two-way relationship between representation and reality around the time of Adam's practice. Changes in the conception of space due to the emergence of the picturesque inspired eighteenth-century architects to find new ways of representing the interior and changes in the way the interior was drawn informed emerging conceptions of picturesque space.

When Adam returned from his Grand Tour in the early 1750s, the golden age of estate building in Great Britain had largely come to an end.[25] Although he still received commissions for new houses, most of his domestic work was for 'the completion of houses half-built by others or the transformation of old houses within their existing shells.'[26] Working within the physical constraints of the existing building to increasingly modest budgets, Adam's interiors were realised incrementally over extended periods, with rooms often designed and installed one at a time.[27] Accordingly, Adam modified his drawing practices, developing a mode of representation that allowed for 'targeted descriptions of individual rooms.'[28] This type of drawing typically showed all the internal elevations of a single room laid flat around a central plan, giving the drawing the appearance of a geometric net that could be folded up to make a paper-thin three-dimensional enclosure. For the architectural historian Robin Evans (1944–1993), this kind of two-dimensional projection, which he called a 'developed surface drawing', allowed Adam to isolate an individual room and luxuriate in its total design.[29] All four walls, the ceiling, the floor, and the furniture could be designed together as an all-encompassing network of geometrical shapes. When a series of interiors designed with this level of intensity were installed in succession, the result was a dazzling sequence of spaces of great intricacy and variety — what Evans calls 'a concatenation of rooms' of 'magnified individuality.'[30]

The developed surface drawing fundamentally altered Adam's conception of the interior. As Adam's two-dimensional depictions of architecture reduced in depth, his constructed interiors became progressively more attenuated. The two-dimensional detail remained, but the three-dimensional modulation of the surface topography of the interior diminished in contour, retreating towards the surface of the wall. In his Etruscan Room at Osterley Park, the surface of the walls and ceiling are almost completely flat. In places, detail is painted and pencil-drawn onto a wallpaper lining. Here, the distinction between representation and reality are blurred, with the constructed interior taking on the physical, material, and inscriptive qualities of a developed surface drawing.

The author's proposal occupies this ambiguous territory between representation and reality. The final drawings are projections of an interior that has the physical qualities of a drawing. The proposed installations appear as paper-lantern-like enclosures with blown-up line drawings of wall panels and ceilings designed by Adam printed onto their surface — room-scaled developed surface drawings folded-up to realise their latent three-dimensional potential. The transparency of the fabric linings would result in a real-world layering effect akin to that achieved in the author's drawings, where watercolour wash and pencil overlays were built up over the top of detailed drawings of the existing condition. In this sense, the constructed interior would carry a memory of the inscriptive and painterly processes through which it was brought into being.

The increasing two-dimensionality of Adam's work and the popularity and reproducibility of his drawing style meant that his designs proliferated in late-eighteenth-century pattern books.[31] It became possible to pick and choose panels designed by Adam and rearrange them to form a new composition that would fit the dimensions of any room. The author's proposal for the Archive Rooms was informed by an earlier project for a temporary pavilion for Graduate Fashion Week at Earl's Court, London, UK in 2011 [Fig. 14]. The project, the result of a collaboration between the author

and architects Will Pirkis and Jonas von Wartburg, can be considered something of a prototype of the proposed installation at Croome. A new developed surface drawing composed of pattern-book panel designs by Adam was screen printed onto large sheets of translucent white fabric and stretched across a studwork frame designed in accordance with the underlying proportional rules of the new room composition [Fig. 15 and Fig. 16].

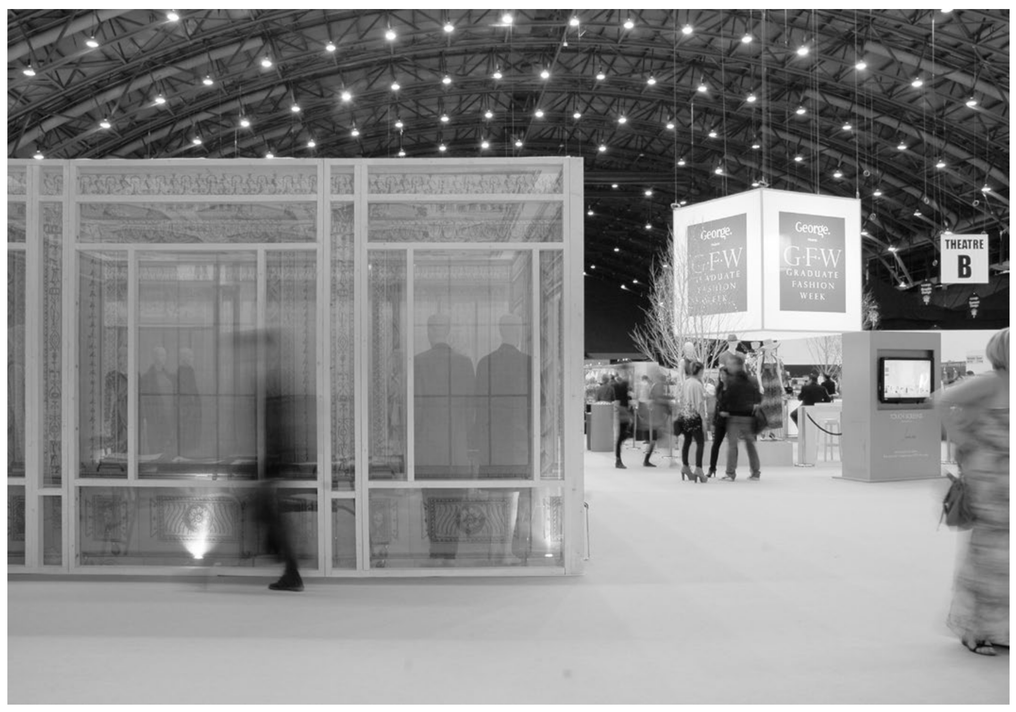

Figure 14.
Robert Adam Room, exterior view, Earl's Court, London, UK. Photograph by the author.

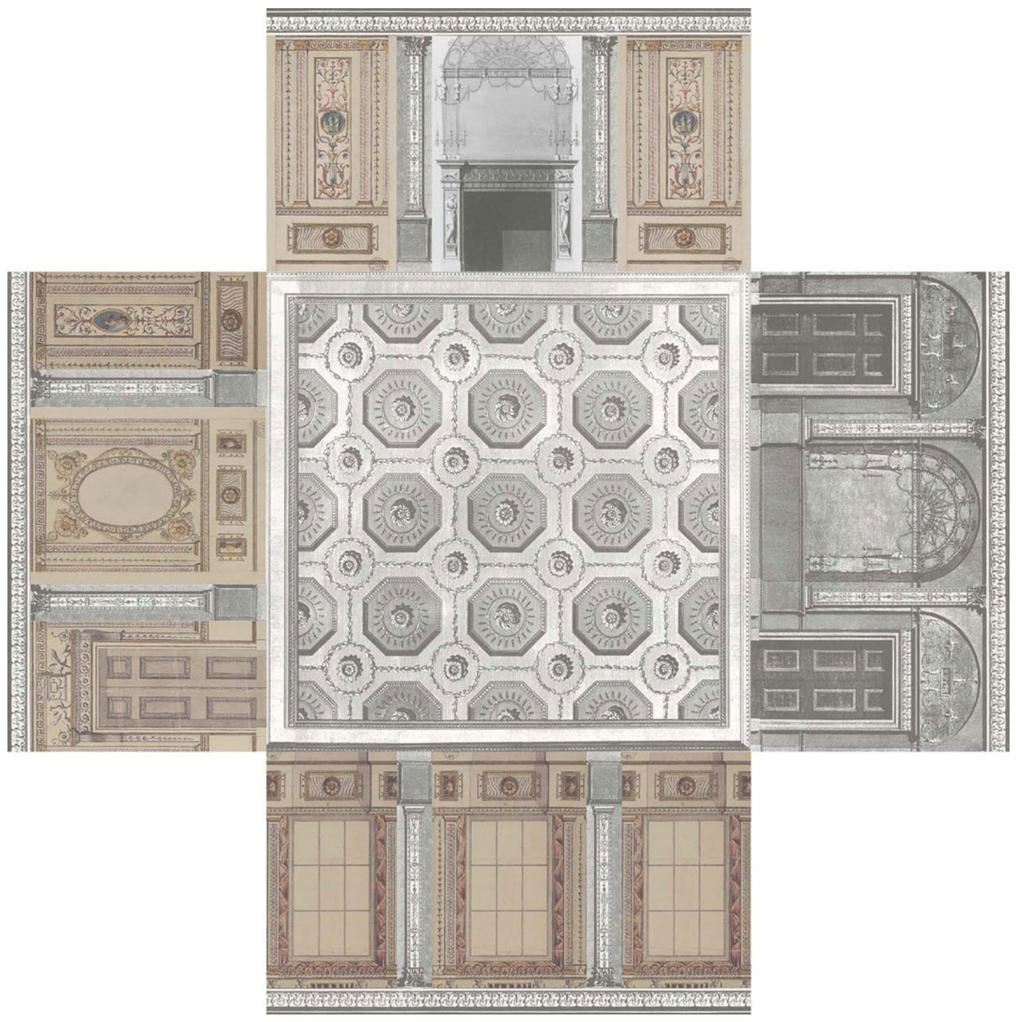

Figure 15.
Developed surface drawing for the *Robert Adam Room*. Montage by the author.



Figure 16.
Robert Adam Room, interior view, Earl's Court, London, UK. Photograph by the author.

Beneath the lights of Earl's Court, the pavilion called to mind an often-overlooked project by Adam depicted in *The Works* entitled *Illumination and Transparency* (1763) — an unrealised proposal for a temporary garden pavilion commissioned by Queen Charlotte (1744–1818) in the grounds of Buckingham House as a surprise to mark the twenty-fifth birthday of her husband King George III (1760–1820).[32] Adam proposed a lightweight timber structure with seventeen arched openings, each covered by a 'transparency' — a painting on a translucent material, which was lit from behind. The pavilion, with its screen-like theatricality, the pictorial flatness of its construction, its attenuated painterly decoration, and its presence as a building entwined in landscape, is arguably Adam's most picturesque project.

In the ephemerality of its construction and the spectral translucency of its appearance, Adam's project anticipates the picturesque practices employed by writer and garden designer René Louis de Girardin (1735–1808) in his creation of the first 'French landscape garden' at Ermenonville in France (1765–1776).[33] As part of the design process, Girardin used full-scale mock-ups to assess the visual impact of proposed future constructions in the landscape. These mock-ups, made from 'poles stretched with white cloth' simulated the 'masses of plants' and 'facades' of potential future interventions.[34] In their abstract, glowing whiteness and pictorial thinness, these temporary constructions, like the author's pavilion at Earl's court and proposal for the Archive Rooms at Croome, represent something of an intermediary between drawing and building, suspended in a state between before and after, simultaneously disappearing and coming into being.

stasis and movement

As we have seen in the previous section, the final composite drawing of the proposal aimed to communicate a sense of spatio-durational progression through a sequence of spaces [Fig. 13]. The author's ambition was, in other words, to communicate a sense of movement though a static mode of artistic expression, that is, the drawing. This reflects the author's ambition for the Archive Rooms installation should it have been realised. The idea that architecture (or the interior), also a static form of expression, could be inculcated with the quality of movement was central to Adam's practice and at the heart of his often-overlooked contribution to the picturesque in the eighteenth century.

While Adam's work is widely understood in the context of eighteenth-century neoclassicism, its relation to the emerging picturesque discourse during the period is less clearly defined.[35] This is perhaps because the picturesque was less conspicuous in Adam's work than in that of his contemporaries. While many sought picturesque effects through the adoption of asymmetrical planning and irregular form, Adam initiated an alternative line of thinking whereby buildings designed in accordance with well-established classical ideas of symmetrical planning and regular form could also be picturesque if they were inculcated with the illusive, painterly quality of 'movement.'[36]

The influence of architect Thomas Sandby (1721–1798) and his brother, landscape painter Paul Sandby (1731–1809) during Adam's early education instilled a 'painterly concern' and an interest in expressing the newly fashionable idea that 'the role of architecture', much like a landscape or a landscape painting, 'was to raise feelings and excite the imagination.'[37] According to Adam, 'movement' in architecture, an inherently static form of artistic expression, could be achieved through a certain mimesis of qualities found in landscape (and landscape painting), namely 'diversity of contour', 'convexity and concavity', 'advancing and receding', and 'variety' of light, shade, and colour.[38] For Adam, architecture possessive of these qualities, such as buildings of the Italian baroque and the English baroque works of architect John Vanbrugh (1664–1726), stimulated in the viewer a 'movement' of 'the eyes, the mind, and the feet.'[39] Through heavily modulated surfaces and exaggerated chiaroscuro effects, baroque buildings stimulated an intense 'movement' of the eyes and inspired the mind to various imaginings, associations, and feelings upon perception. The rhythmic organisation of components and the sense of progression towards a spatial apotheosis stimulated bodily locomotion. As well as providing visual stimulation, the gradual progression through rooms of varying proportion, surface treatment, and levels of intimacy towards a central climatic space caused fluctuations in heart rate and an increased expansion and contraction of the lungs.[40] This complex and often-overlooked aspect of the picturesque, developed through Adam's practice, has largely been forgotten.

While Adam attempted to enliven the exterior architectural surface with the quality of 'movement',

it was through his interiorisation of the concept that it achieved its most meaningful expression. In the eighteenth century, it was Adam who extended the provenance of the architect to include the interior and it was 'in the planning and adornment of the most lavish interiors of his time that he fulfilled himself.'[41] His agenda for the interior was most emphatically delineated in *The Works*, which he and his brother and practice partner, the architect James Adam (1732–1794), published in a series of volumes between 1773 and 1778.[42] Through a combination of engravings (perspectival views and orthographic projections) and prefacing texts, Adam sought to outline a 'truly modern architectural style' that 'expressed to perfection, the sophistication, gaiety and elegance' of the day.[43] While his earlier publication *The Ruins* (1764) had marked the rise of the Adam style as a 'striking form of eclectic classicism', *The Works* 'managed a subtle change of emphasis', unveiling the picturesque as the future design direction of the office.[44]

Adam saw the completed interiors presented in *The Works* as a remedy to the 'dull succession of similar apartments' characteristic of the fashionable Burlingtonian neo-Palladian architecture of the early eighteenth century, which took the static repose of Renaissance architecture as its source code.[45] In contrast, Adam aspired to the interior condition that he had encountered at Diocletian's Palace and depicted in *The Ruins*. For him, this interior, in both its ruinous state and its imagined unspoiled halcyon grandeur, possessed the kind of 'movement' he had observed in landscape and the various species of baroque architecture he had come to admire on account of its 'remarkable diversity of form' and 'variety.'[46]

One of the featured projects in *The Works* is the interior at Syon House.[47] Drawing inspiration from Diocletian's Palace, Adam employed a variety of visual and spatial effects to inculcate a sequence of reception rooms with the quality of 'movement.' At Syon, the eye busily traces the varied contour of the interior, adjusting in each room to a new set of formal, material, and decorative conditions. The mind is stimulated by a multitude of allusions to different architectural epochs and styles. Bodily movement through space is prompted by framed glimpses into subsequent spaces and through the manipulation of floor levels, which together imbue the spatial sequence with a topographic aspect akin to landscape.[48]

In all its diversity, the sequence at Syon, designed and installed incrementally between 1761 and 1767, is representative of Adam's rapidly changing conception of the interior during the period. The overtly constructional high relief treatments in the rooms at the start of the sequence (designed in 1761) stand in sharp contrast to the illusory, illogical, and purely decorative two-dimensional effects in the spaces at the end of the sequence (designed by 1763 and completed in 1767). In this sense, the interior represents something of a progression through time and changing tastes. Demonstrating the shift from 'architectonic' to 'picturesque', it can be read as a journey through Adam's thinking during the period — an episodic and evolving account of the Adam style. It can also be understood as a physical manifestation of the zeitgeist, representative of the shift in architectural taste from Burlingtonianism to Adamism signalled by the growing tendency to design in two dimensions rather than in three, in line rather than mass, and in the 'lightened elegance' of 'the pretty' rather than in 'the sublime.'[49] On a more fundamental level, it is as an interior sequence that communicates ideas about the evolution of architectural style over a much longer *durée*, from the heavily articulated, massiveness evocative of the architecture of the ancient world that Adam had surveyed on his Grand Tour, to the thinness and delicacy of the contemporary picturesque-inflected neoclassicism, which, for Adam, most adequately represented the sophistication and lightness of the day.

On a modest scale and budget, the author attempted to inculcate the interior at Croome with the kind of picturesque 'movement' Adam coveted. Elements incorporated from the Adamesque interior — varied

room forms, shapely niches, decorative treatments of differing character, colouring and connotation, and spatial and material layering — would conspire to result in a heterogeneous interior condition. The proposal also borrowed techniques used by Adam to stimulate bodily locomotion through space. The 'convexity and concavity' of the wall surfaces and the folded fabric linings; the expansion and contraction or 'rise and fall' of the ceiling level; and the interplay between light, shadow, and reflection would provide a sense of 'movement' in both the horizontal and vertical planes, lending the interior some of the drama of moving through a landscape.[50]

The proposed installation was designed to be engaged with on multiple levels. On the one hand, it could be enjoyed superficially as an atmospherically diverse set of spaces for the display of archival material. On the other, it could be apprehended on an intellectual level as an archaising artefact, emitting ideas about the evolution of Adam's conception of interior space and surface over time. An interior capable of being 'read' in this way invokes esoteric eighteenth-century ways of designing gardens from which the picturesque conception of architecture and the interior emerged. According to the landscape historian John Dixon Hunt (1936–) the period was characterised by a shift from one picturesque mode of garden design to another: from a literary and intellectual picturesque mode prevalent in the early eighteenth century, where gardens were inscribed with allegorical, political, and cultural meaning, and could be 'read' like a poem or a painting by those sensitive to their messaging; to a late eighteenth century phenomenological and sensual mode where gardens and buildings were designed to intensify the existing physical qualities of a site and provide a sensorially stimulating experience for the visitor.[51] Like Adam's interiors, which developed in the transitionary period between one picturesque design sensibility and the other, the author's proposal for Croome was designed to appeal on both intellectual and sensorial levels.

conclusion

Through a series of reflections on the author's unrealised proposal for the Archive Rooms installation at Croome Court, this essay has explored latent spaces of potentiality for imagining interiors between historical research and design proposition, past and future, representation and reality, stasis and movement.

Propositionally oriented research has opened up new possibilities for appreciating the picturesque aspects of Adam's practice and brought to light often overlooked and esoteric historical ways of designing, drawing, and making interiors. Concepts, techniques, and strategies from Adam's practice, revealed by the expanded wall chart mapping, have been explicated through application in the design proposal, demonstrating their potential contemporary utility and suggesting possible new agendas for practice.

By reflecting on the methodological approach to the project, the essay reveals a potential foundational strategy for future historically informed design-led research enquires of this nature that bring together historical-interpretive research, visual methods, and inscriptive methods synonymous with architectural design practice, including sketching and orthographic drawing.

acknowledgements

Thank you to Will Pirkis and Jonas von Wartburg for their collaboration on the Robert Adam Room project for Graduate Fashion Week at Earl's Court in 2011. Many of the ideas explored in the project went on to inform the author's proposal for the Archive Rooms at Croome Court.

author biography

Shaun Young is an Assistant Professor of Architecture at the Department of Architecture and Built Environment at Northumbria University. His research is practice-led and explores how concepts, techniques, and strategies from the history of architecture can be used to inform contemporary design.

notes

1 There are several documentary studies of the picturesque. For a detailed overview of the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century period with which it is most often associated, see Christopher Hussey, *The Picturesque: Studies in a Point of View*, 2nd edn (Cass, 1967). For a detailed exploration of key aspects of the picturesque and the ways that it has informed more recent developments in art and architecture, see John Macarthur, *The Picturesque: Architecture, Disgust and Other Irregularities* (Routledge, 2007).

2 David King, *The Complete Works of Robert and James Adam* (Butterworth, 1991).

3 Robin Evans, *Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Essays* (Architectural Association, 1997), p. 207.

4 Damie Stillman, *Decorative Work of Robert Adam* (St Martin's Press, 1973), pp. 19–2. The terms 'architectonic' and 'picturesque' used to describe Adam's changing sensibility are borrowed from A. A. Tait, see Alan Andrew Tait, *Robert Adam: Drawing and Imagination* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 5–15.

5 Evans, *Translations from Drawing to Building*, pp. 195–231.

6 Robert Adam, *Ruins of the Palace of the Emperor Diocletian at Spalatro in Dalmatia* (printed for the author, 1764).

7 John Fleming, *Robert Adam and His Circle: In Edinburgh and Rome* (Murray, 1978), pp. 164–68.

8 Yves Alain Bois, 'A Picturesque Stroll around "Clara-Clara"', *October*, 29 (1984), pp. 43–46.

9 Nicholas Savage, 'Shadow, Shading and Outline in Architectural Engraving from Fréart to Letarouilly', in *Dealing with the Visual: Art History, Aesthetics and Visual Culture*, ed. by Caroline van Eck and Edward Winters (Ashgate, 2005), pp. 242–83 (p. 251).

10 Savage, 'Shadow, Shading and Outline', p. 251.

11 King, *The Complete Works of Robert and James Adam*, pp. 2–7 (p. 2). Also see Stillman, *Decorative Work of Robert Adam*; James Lees Milne, *The Age of Adam* (Batsford, 1947); Doreen Yarwood, *Robert Adam* (Dent, 1970).

12 John Summerson, *Architecture in Britain, 1530 to 1830*, 9th edn (Yale University Press, 1993), p. 251; Percy Fitzgerald, *Robert Adam, Artist and Architect: His Works and His System* (Fisher Unwin, 1904), p. 21.

13 Jon Kolko, 'Abductive Thinking and Sensemaking: The Drivers of Design Synthesis', *Design Issues*, 26.1 (2010), pp. 15–28; *Interpretive Research Design: Concepts and Processes*, ed. by Peregrine Schwartz-Shea and Dvora Yanow (Routledge, 2012).

14 For more on the Tapestry Room at Croome, see John Goldsmith Phillips, 'The Tapestry Room from Croome Court', *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, 18 November 1959.

15 Sarah Hay, *Croome Redefined: National Trust Conservation Management and Maintenance Plan*, June 2012, pp. 268–271.

16 Stillman, *Decorative Work of Robert Adam*, p. 28. Also see Ian Bristow 'The Room in the Context of Robert Adam's Work', *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin*, 82.351/352 (1986), pp. 13–19.

17 Hay, *Croome Redefined*, p. 271.

18 Tait, *Robert Adam*, p. 5.

19 Tait, *Robert Adam*, pp. 5–15.

20 Tait, *Robert Adam*, pp. 5–15.

21 Adam, *Ruins of the Palace of the Emperor Diocletian at Spalatro in Dalmatia*; and Robert Adam and James Adam, *The Works in Architecture*, intro. by Henry Hope Reed (Printed for the authors, 1778; facsimile repr. Dover Publications, 2006).

22 The publication contains many engravings. Some specific examples that are pertinent to the themes explored in this essay and include Plate 5, *Plan of the Principal Story of Sion House*; Plate 6, Section of one *End of the Hall, next to the private Apartments*; and Plate 82, *View of the Library at Sion House*.

23 Tait, *Robert Adam*, p. 5.

24 Evans, *Translations from Drawing to Building*, pp. 195–231.

25 Howard Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600–1840* (John Murray, 1978), p. 48.

26 Summerson, *Architecture in Britain*, p. 262.

27 Evans, *Translations from Drawing to Building*, p. 201.

28 Evans, *Translations from Drawing to Building*, p. 201.

29 Evans, *Translations from Drawing to Building*, pp. 202–03.

30 Evans, *Translations from Drawing to Building*, pp. 207.

31 Richard Hill, *Designs and their Consequences: Architecture and Aesthetics* (Yale University Press, 1999), pp. 15–19.

32 Tait, *Robert Adam*, pp. 127–29.

33 For Girardin's picturesque-inflected approach to garden design, see José Menudo and Nicolas Rieucau, 'The Rural Economics of René de Girardin: Landscapes at the Service of L'Idéologie Nobiliaire', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 81.3 (2022), pp. 429–49.

34 Bois, 'A Picturesque Stroll around "Clara-Clara"', p. 38.

35 For Adam and the neoclassical, see Arthur Thomas Bolton, *Architecture of Robert and James Adam* (Country Life, 1922); Summerson, *Architecture in Britain*; and Milne, *The Age of Adam*.

36 For the concept of 'movement' in Adam's work, see Ariyuki K*ondo, Robert and James Adam, Architects of the Age of Enlightenment* (Routledge, 2012), pp. 85–127.

37 Macarthur, *The Picturesque*, p. 235.

38 Adam and Adam, *The Works in Architecture*, p. 1.

39 Miranda Jane Routh Hausberg, 'Robert Adam's Revolution in Architecture' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Penn State University, 2019), p. 345.

40 For discussion on the picturesque conception of 'movement' in relation to the works of the baroque, see Macarthur, *The Picturesque*, pp. 234–42.

41 Summerson, *Architecture in Britain*, p. 427.

42 Adam and Adam, *The Works in Architecture*.

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44 Tait, *Robert Adam*, p. 111.

45 Adam, *Ruins of the Palace of the Emperor Diocletian at Spalatro in Dalmatia*, p. 9.

46 Adam, *Ruins of the Palace of the Emperor Diocletian at Spalatro in Dalmatia*, p. 9.

47 Adam and Adam, *The Works in Architecture*, pp. 1–3.

48 Adam and Adam, *The Works in Architecture*, pp. 1–3.

49 Milne, *The Age of Adam*, p. 8.

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soft minimalism: georgia o'keeffe's aesthetics of photographic personhood

Chris Fernald
Independent Scholar
0009-0002-6949-0274

abstract

American artist Georgia O'Keeffe's iconic interior design sensibilities are nowhere more fully expressed than within the adobe walls of her home in Abiquiú, New Mexico. A novel intersection of American Southwest, Japanese, and Modernist styles, in the decades following the house's renovation in 1949, O'Keeffe invited photographers into her home, and turned the house into an influential site for the production and distribution of images of a highly marketable desert asceticism. Her photographic archive spanned seventy-five years, appearing in publications ranging from *House Beautiful* (1963) to *Cereal* (2017). Yet, despite their wide distribution and lasting influence, these photos resulted in something far more complex than appears to have been initially intended.

Both during and after her life, photographs of the Abiquiú home and O'Keeffe's persona became coterminous in the public consciousness, even without her presence in the photographic frame. In the contemporary context of digital images, the photographs of Abiquiú's interiors — enmeshed with O'Keeffe's personality — serve as a strangely prescient fable for how we would come to reconstruct ourselves as images and to reconceive ourselves as environmentally entangled persons. It is here that we find one consequential source point for the creation of a new kind of aspirational being in the digital age — a self formed at the nexus of body, domestic interior, and photograph.

This essay explores how O'Keeffe, and her photographic collaborators, used the mediation of interior images to cultivate her public persona and to produce, in turn, a new scenography of American womanhood. It examines how the proliferation of her photogenic aesthetics of desert living served as an embryonic analogue to the hyper-mediation of our digital subjectivities in today's attention economy. In Abiquiú's photographs we discover a novel use for interior photography in which the self is recovered and reconstituted within the dehumanising glare of the camera.

keywords

Georgia O'Keeffe; minimalism; embodiment; phenomenology; architectural photography

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introduction

Braiding together an original mix of ascetic sensibilities from twentieth-century modernist design, traditional Japanese aesthetics, and the architectural vernaculars of desert regions the world over, American artist Georgia O'Keeffe's home at Abiquiú, New Mexico (1945) constitutes a distinctly austere decorative style. Thanks in no small part to her willingness to open her doors to photojournalists in her later life, and to the posthumous transformation of her home into a popular house museum, her domestic aesthetic has blossomed into one of the predominant minimalist interior design vernaculars in the US of the last fifteen years. We might call this design sensibility 'soft minimalism.'

Today, soft minimalism comprises a gestalt so seamless that we tend to forget its patchwork of aesthetic references or its possible origins in O'Keeffe's desert hacienda. In more recent years, terms like 'Santa Fe Modern', 'Japandi', 'Pacific Natural', and 'Marfa Modern' have been cast like linguistic nets, hoping to encircle the same aesthetic sensibilities.[1] Yet, neither these terms nor their reportage offer a proper historicisation of this strain of minimalism. Instead, they seem to imply, by omission, that its characteristics have only entwined in recent years. Despite this, when we review, for instance, Instagram photos of Athena Calderone's latest rug collection, browse images of the Cycladic islands, Ibiza, or Utah's Amangiri desert resort, or peruse the décor arrangements of Colin King's interiors, we do not experience the birth of a novel aesthetic but rather echoes of its resurrection.

From the styling of New York fashion and lifestyle boutiques like La Garçonne to international corporations like Zara Home; from HGTV home renovations to even sci-fi blockbusters like Denis Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) or *Dune* (2021), Abiquiú's soft minimalism is apparent in the current social imaginary of desert dwellings and coastal homes. While the path of O'Keeffe's influence upon these expressions cannot be literally traced in every instance, the fact remains that a sensibility she cultivated with artful deliberation has seen tremendous proliferation in recent years, producing secondary examples that, in turn, beget influence to new audiences and new creations.

The year 2017 seems to have marked a particular high point of interest in and acknowledgement of O'Keeffe not as an artist but also as a designer and stylist. That year, scholar and curator Wanda Corn performed a much-needed triage upon the artist's creative legacy, marshalling this long-simmering interest in her private life into an exhibition called *Living Modern*.[2] This travelling show debuted at the Brooklyn Museum before appearing at a handful of other American institutions.[3] By including her clothes and a limited range of domestic effects, *Living Modern* suggested that O'Keeffe treated her personal sartorial sensibility and domestic flair with an intention and innovation equal to her famous paintings. That year would also see O'Keeffe's interior designs featured in P. Gayle Tapp's *How They Decorated: Inspiration from Great Women of the Twentieth Century*, along with a number of periodicals including *Fathom*, *AnOther Magazine*, *New Mexico Magazine*, *Kinfolk*, and the bible of living minimally, *Cereal*.[4] An Arizona home reportedly inspired by Abiquiú in *Dezeen* and *Home Journal*, would follow in 2019.[5] Aside from mainstream publications and the countless built spaces that echo this aesthetic, there is also the truly unquantifiable proliferation of photographs of her home and likeness across social media prior to and after the exhibition and subsequent publication of these articles. Yet a substantive theorisation as to why her particular interior design philosophy should see tremendous spread today remains strangely missing not only from *Living Modern* and its exhibition text, but from this wider field of publications more generally.

Thus, the question arises: why should this aesthetic, formed decades ago in the remote hinterlands of New Mexico by one of the twentieth century's most famous artists, transform over the past 20 years into a popular global design vernacular? What currency do images of soft minimalism hold in today's desire

economy? And what role does an increasingly photographic world play in resurrecting O'Keeffe's aesthetic paradigm?

This essay looks beyond the usual platitudes about why decorative minimalism attracts so many contemporary Western subjects. Building upon the body of research devoted to architectural photography by scholars such as Claire Zimmerman, Beatriz Colomina, Mark Wigley, Charles Rice, and Dave Loder, it brings greater scrutiny to the media landscape in which images of Abiquiú and its aesthetic relations appear. Specifically, it considers O'Keeffe's work in the context of a semio-capitalist condition that, as Franco 'Bifo' Berardi has theorised, reshapes human consciousness in historically unprecedented fashion.[6] Treating the contemporary aesthetic subject as a technologically and economically contingent entity, the essay considers how architectural photography may both reflect and influence the contemporary self-image of their viewing subject, their aspirations, and their identity. In other words, the answer to why we see today's widespread adoption of O'Keeffe's aesthetics may lie in examining how our late-capitalist, image-saturated culture may create new desires for definition and self-hood which we turn to architectural and interior photography to satisfy — desires that O'Keeffe's decorative vernacular appears uncommonly capable of satiating. In this telling, a complex passage from O'Keeffe's life offers a fable — or premonition — for how both soft minimalism and the interior architectural image would come to function in the present.

This essay offers sustained and critical descriptive attention to the distinct, highly pervasive decorative vernacular of soft minimalism. It unpacks soft minimalism by narrativising the motivations and results of O'Keeffe's decision to publicise her private interiors. Additionally, it draws upon the work of digital theorists and media scholars to speculate upon the appeal of this aesthetic and the reason for its spread. The essay also reframes this investigation in terms of a wider techno-medial change in human consciousness and widespread practices of identity performance online that use architectural and locational data. Lastly, it groups these threads together to posit a novel theory of the function of the soft minimalist architectural image in the present. And, rather than perpetuate the proliferation of more photography of O'Keeffe's interiors, it leaves the remarkable imagery of these environments for the reader themselves to discover.

the o'keeffe aesthetic: soft minimalism's formulas

While her New Mexico homes would prove to be sites of continual interest and investment for Georgia O'Keeffe over the decades, the central fulcrum of her aesthetic — the pairing of austere, elegantly impoverished vernaculars of desert civilisations with the stuff of modern design — endures in every iteration. Indeed, the home's consistency of expression across time — and its synchrony with her fashion and artwork — suggest a stable framework within which O'Keeffe expressed herself toward all horizons of her life.[7] Drawing upon the decades-spanning photographic archive of the home's interiors, we may infer the existence of a number of principles that guided O'Keeffe's design sensibility, and the soft minimalist expressions emerging in its wake today.

Soft minimalism borrows aesthetic hallmarks from modernism — namely emptiness, economy of form, an eased boundary between outside and in, and narrow and neutral colour palettes — and sutures them to the adobe ranch of the American Southwest and the time-tempered woods and papers of a Japanese teahouse. In photographs of Abiquiú, we find sparse, light-filled rooms softly blanketed in desaturated earth tones and whites, leavened by the weightless Zen of a paper Noguchi lamp, warmed in the ruddy geometric abstractions of Diné textiles, and disciplined by the mechanical rigour of an Eames chair. There is a sense of wabi-sabi's ennobled wear and exquisite poverty at Abiquiú and its soft minimalist descendants,

where totems of conspicuous consumption are supplanted by sacral displays of imperfect, time-worn objects. A sense of the slowness of geologic time pervades soft minimalist space, with artifacts from the natural world like driftwood, animal skeletons, stones, and shells anchoring its rooms like stakes in a tent. Acting as apparent souvenirs from a practice of desert wandering, such relics suggest a sense of wonder with the minutiae of the world that has survived the deadening assault of the contemporary, the technological, and the cheap abundance of mass production. In this way, the contemporary soft minimalist suggests a figure from an earlier age wondrously appearing in our own. It is a figure that has preserved, or retrieved, a way of seeing that has been seemingly lost to much of the modern Western world.

Despite O'Keeffe's lifelong commitment to the project of modernism, and her impressive collection of modernist design masterpieces from the twentieth century, her domestic sensibilities are characterised by neither masculinist heroism nor mechanical fetishism. Emerging in the wake of modernism's initial polemics, O'Keeffe's soft minimalist space is not Le Corbusier's sterling, chrome-plated 'machine for living.'[8] Instead, linen cushions, dirt-caked ceramic pots, animal skeletons, and a range of vernacular woods and adobe soften modernist space's alleged disdain for history and the human body with a sense of intimacy, mysticism, humility, and regionality, offering a complementary yet distinct vision of idealised personhood. Soft minimalism sweeps away modernism's opposing desires — its humanist intent and fantasies of domination — to uncover the eros it only ever barely suppressed: an ascetic's longing for bodily and worldly withdrawal.

Abiquiú's initial construction and decoration occurred during a postwar transition, where pre-war and interwar modernism flowed across the Atlantic into what was contemporaneously termed 'humanized Modernism' in the US.[9] The soft minimalism of O'Keeffe resonated with what by 1949 — the year that the home's renovation was completed — was already a well-known caricature of an increasingly 'organic' and 'human' postwar modern interior.[10] Indeed, many of O'Keeffe's sensibilities align with many hallmarks that stayed consistent with modernist interiors, while incorporating local Southwestern vernaculars and her personal interests. Ironically, these inclusions and adaptations would ultimately allow O'Keeffe to transcend historical clichés, while producing the new cliché of soft minimalism as a contemporary signpost for luxury, austerity, and refinement.[11]

Soft minimalist space tends to possess a relatively narrow colour palette, one composed primarily of white and accented by a range of browns, grays, pinks, and clays. Black may be a supporting colour, but the space is more likely to evoke the feeling of the desert during the daytime than during its shadow hours. O'Keeffe consistently designed within these colours, a palette seemingly gleaned from the rocks and soils of the New Mexico landscape around her. But with white as her home's most prominent and foundational colour, O'Keeffe's interiors also evoke the muted sensorium of a silent, snow-crested desert. Nearly every room in the home, from walls, floors, and ceilings to chairs, tables, and appliances, adheres to this narrow palette, with the artist's studio offering a particularly strong example of her rigorous chromatic discipline.

In soft minimalism, the straight lines and rigid angles attributed to modernism tend to dominate the silhouettes of its furniture and its rooms. Yet, the strictness of 'the grid' is never sacrosanct; in fact, we often find it fluctuating under the influence of an errant curve or breaking wave. In the Abiquiú House, for instance, the office and sitting area are a symphony of muted rectangular planes that refract the proportions of what is arguably the room's visual and practical focus — O'Keeffe's self-designed plywood worktables. A number of interior features echo and enhance its geometric properties: the two weathered wood doors that bookmark the office; the bright, gauzy-

edged rectangles of the skylights folded into the grid of the traditional wooden ceiling; and the large, un-paned windows that frame the outside landscape. And yet, the room feels at peace in large part due to the understatement with which it expresses its geometries. In tracing the spread of rectangular forms in the open spaces of the studio, we see modernism's indicative geometries on full display. In comparison to the flat planes of the room's principle features — the shelves, the desks, the armoire, the doors, and even the skylights and bank of fluorescent lights above — rounded forms are supporting players in this composition. They appear mainly in the sitting area in smaller and shyer guises than their more angular counterparts, including a white O'Keeffe sculpture, two cattle horns, and a Saarinen Tulip Table blending into the white surfaces behind them. When we examine the space for its minor key of curving lines and uneven forms, the room shifts into soft minimalism's particular geometric disposition. Like a breast pressed from the punitive constraints of a corset, O'Keeffe's studio constricts, but never fully conceals, the organic, the soft, the circular, and the fleshy.

Among the most distinguishing qualities of soft minimalism is a commitment to preserving pools of 'emptiness' in interior spaces. As curators and artists working in the 'white cube' exhibition space, and as fashion brands such as Issey Miayke, Calvin Klein, and Giorgio Armani well know, an inverse relationship exists between the amount of space around an object and its perceived value. As scholar Penny Sparke notes, 'the mere possession of minimally styled domestic furniture items fabricated in modern materials was sufficient to denote the presence of "art" or "value" in that interior.'[12] Such styling conventions are likely the legacy of staging practices that inaugurated some of modernist architecture's first photographs, where photographers and architects sought to imply human life with only the barest of props and furnishings. Examples of styling exercises within the photographic record of Le Corbusier's villas, for example, include a pair of *Corbusien* sunglasses, hat, and two small packages on a rooftop table at Villa Savoye; a lonely loaf of bread and teapot in Villa Savoye's kitchen; and two mugs, an electric fan, and a single, raw fish, sinewy and sensual on a square-tiled countertop, in a kitchen scene from 1927 at Villa Garches, empty other than this frontal tableau and a handful of other kitchen items that recede into the background.[13]

Continuing these curiously empty styling conventions of early modernist architectural photography, O'Keeffe's ascetic sense for composing space with furniture and decorative objects is also largely consistent with other minimalist interiors in the US that would emerge in tandem with and in the wake of Abiquiú's mediatisation in the 1960s. New York is particularly rich with prime examples of this sensibility, such as in the residence of artist Donald Judd (1968), Alan Buschbaum's loft for scholar Rosalind Krauss (1976), and Robert Patino's apartment for jewellery designer Elsa Peretti (1976).[14] The soft minimalist, like the minimalist, leaves ample space around their objects and affords special time and investment in arrangements whose scarcity of elements maximise the dilation of their auras of value and significance. A rather conservative, and often seemingly casual, approach to the furnishing of space in soft minimalism suggests that the effort required for creating more traditional decoration schemes has been spent elsewhere, perhaps in more noble or esoteric directions. But the idiosyncratic arrangements that often appear in soft minimalist space also suggest that the work of interior styling is itself an important task, one requiring discipline and focus. Further, the uncluttered spaces that house the soft minimalist suggest an enlightened figure who has achieved a profound mastery over the disorder of everyday life.

Paradoxes of controlled spontaneity and studied casualness strongly colour the soft minimalist approach to styling. In the display of fine artifacts like art, sculptures, or furnishings, we find decorative accents are often positioned in space in a seemingly

unstudied, un-precious manner: stacked, leaning, even placed near or on the floor. These are foreclosures of traditional modes of display that might see cups hidden behind cupboards or paintings in frames or, as in O'Keeffe's home, a prized collection of stones placed in a vitrine. This suggests a latent casualness that obscures the soft minimalist's fastidious attenuation to the aesthetics of their lives. From time to time, soft minimalism forecloses.

The soft minimalist thus emerges as a person of special intention and credibility, one whose project we may not be able to fully grasp, yet whose virtue and aesthetic value is without question. After all, how can a shelf be *just* an ordinary mechanism for storage when its contents have been whittled down to only a handful of rarified, potentially useless objects?

To really feel the fullness — or emptiness — of minimalist phenomena, it is not enough to simply see what lies before our eyes. We must also become aware of minimalism's negative image — all that has been excluded from its tableaus. Such an awareness may rise beyond an ambient knowing into conscious thought, though feeling minimalism's full effects may require other means of perception than conscious knowledge. Any instance of minimalism is protected by an invisible border wall around its spatial frontiers, and its eros is fuelled, in part, by our ability to imagine, or to unconsciously know, the acts of gatekeeping and expulsion that happen at its protected margins and the force of pleasure that animates such gatekeeping. For every minimalist expression, there is a universe worth of consumer goods and objects that have been deemed un-castable actors for its play, non-conforming materials, objects, and compositions of space that have been — or theoretically could be — banished from its 'looks'. When we consider that a protective barrier encircles every instance of minimalism, and that such borders are home to acts of both profound and superficial curatorial discipline, minimalism becomes a paradoxical declaration of freedom. It is freedom *from* the detritus, disorder, and lowliness of the mass market and the mediocrity of 'average' social experience.[15] And it is freedom *to* craft the material world, and recast the inner self, in the same astringent image.

However, just as the movement of falling leaves or the swaying of a tree is necessary in order for us to 'see' wind, soft minimalism's aesthetic rigour is made more visible when placed in contrast with small moments that do not fall under its principles. As Corn notes, 'O'Keeffe enjoyed introducing little surprises into her otherwise monochromatic home decor, just as she relished little surprises in her clothes: buttons, stitching, or wearing a red coat with her black dresses.'[16] Aesthetic discrepancies allow for a sense of the individualism of the soft minimalist to emerge — a thinking, living, and breathing mind, with its 'own' tastes and idiosyncratic enjoyments, despite the soft minimalist's adherence to an aesthetic temperament shared by others of their class. The deviant is, in some sense, a proxy for the unruly inner self, a fingerprint of the spontaneous, childlike disorder that affects the image of artistic temperament that is so operationalised in individualist Western societies (one epitomised in the 'lazy, indulgent vacation feeling' and 'uninhibited and sensual materiality' of the jumbled interiors of another artistic titan of the twentieth century — Pablo Picasso).[17]

But the affordance of discrepancy engenders another outcome. Across each channel of soft minimalism's look, from colour to furniture to the arrangements of décor items in space, minor tensions and dissonance are rather fragile creations that require constant administration and investment. By allowing the discrepant into an otherwise clearly defined paradigm, the soft minimalist is obliged to distinguish between what dissonance or disorder in the soft minimalist formula is authentic — or flattering to a soft minimalist self-image — and thus subject to *preservation*, and what is not, and thus subject to elimination.

sex and self-image

In O'Keeffe's desert home, we find not only an influential site for the production and distribution of what would become soft minimalism in America and the world over, but also evidence that suggests how this strand of minimalism is animated by a particular human longing that has seen proliferation in our own time. Beyond an anodyne system of décor, or a tool for soothing overstimulated modern minds, soft minimalism — as both an interior design aesthetics and as a genre of photographic images on the internet — represents a stranger psychic strategy. When we scratch beneath the sandy surfaces of its desert fantasia, we find a recurring human desire to reform our unruly inner worlds by upsetting the boundaries between our bodies and materials of our surroundings. But, distinct from earlier twentieth century styles of minimalism, part of the genesis of O'Keeffe's mature domestic aesthetic — and the key to its spread today — lies in an intergenerational wish that it may prove able to contend with the dehumanising force of hyper-mediation and the compunction to author a public self-image. O'Keeffe appears to have experienced something of this condition far earlier than we who live in the mirrored halls of universal micro-fame production today. Indeed, for O'Keeffe, the content of her public image was one of the key injuries of her life. And this injurious image may help us to understand why, well into her middle age, the artist allowed photojournalists to turn her private home into a photographic commons.

The source of O'Keeffe's injury lay, in part, with her husband, the American photographer and gallerist, Alfred Stieglitz. While Stieglitz was certainly a champion for the equal value of women's art, a vanguard especially for his time and his circle, in his frequent exhibitions of O'Keeffe's work, his writings and photographs of the artist rarely strayed from reductive narratives that divined maelstroms of liberated female sexual power inside the painterly abstraction of her images and within the woman herself.[18] Through his own statements, the essays he commissioned, and the photographs he exhibited of O'Keeffe in stages of undress, Stieglitz framed her paintings as expressions of a sexually emancipated woman and of powerful unconscious feminine forces, appealing both to the Freudian fervour of the early decades of the twentieth century and to the rather timeless titillations of sexual desire.[19] The oft-noted formal parallels between O'Keeffe's flower paintings and female genitalia constitute perhaps the most well-known trope about her work, followed perhaps by her synonymity with the American state of New Mexico.[20] For better or worse, this image of the artist and her work as somehow bound by an extraordinary libidinal energy would play a vital role in producing the wealth and remarkable prestige O'Keeffe enjoyed. It was, nonetheless, a narrative she would disavow her entire life.[21] However, it is unclear why she did not more forcefully condemn Stieglitz for this framing, one her closest confidant and most ardent supporter had a huge hand in producing. Perhaps it was a combination of love and fidelity, an unwillingness to challenge this public persona openly, or a calculated loss — the payoff of which she was willing to make.[22] As her biographer, Roxane Robinson, points out, in matters of Freudian analysis, every denial is an admission. Even if she had said something, would anyone have really believed her?[23]

But like many navigating a creative economy based in disintegrating bounds between our lives and our products, O'Keeffe yearned for a new image to live within — one truer to her nature as she knew it. Indeed, it seems that she never fully rejected the notion that an artist and her art may share some equivalence. After all, the dream that life and art might — and should — fuse is a recurring trope throughout cultural history, and the modernist reformation of which O'Keeffe was a part was particularly committed to the pursuit of this goal. But it was sex's role as the glue that bound person and artwork together that seems to have disturbed the artist. Regardless of her personal feelings on the matter of her celebrity, the truth remains that she did not lean away from the activity of building her persona, of translating her

personhood into thematically rich, concise images and vignettes that could represent her in the public imagination — and perhaps even to her own mind.

As a public figure, O'Keeffe was no stranger to the ecstatic, odd, and decentring experience of living at once as a body but also as a series of images orbiting beyond her skin. In fact, the artist was the subject of an uncommonly high number of photographs over the course of her life. While few of us today are strangers to the experience of being photographed, it is worth remembering that regularly sitting for photographs was still a nascent phenomenon back in 1918 when O'Keeffe began posing for Stieglitz's camera. Even decades after her first sittings, it is plausible that only a small number of people were subject to the camera's gaze with the same frequency as O'Keeffe, and it was an even smaller contingent of photographic subjects whose images were tethered to some platform for public consumption.

However, it was only after Stieglitz's death, and after her acquisition and subsequent renovation of her Abiquiú hacienda, that she finally had the means to counter the sexualised narratives constructed by the interpretations of her famous flower paintings. In this effort, O'Keeffe would turn not only to paint and canvas, but, most curiously, to interior architecture and its images.[24] It is in this deputisation of interior photography as a peculiar kind of tool — a technology with which she could construct new imaginations about her personhood — that we find an unexpected precedent for how images of interior environments operate in social media today.

The vernaculars of the Southwest O'Keeffe incorporated into her paintings, and the highly aestheticised, carefully constructed rooms she created for the camera's gaze at Abiquiú, added new dimensions to perceptions of her personhood and of her work. A steady stream of publicity would move from a trickle in the first decade of her residence to a fairly regular cadence over the following years, beginning with a September 1960 feature 'Women of American Art' in *Look* magazine, featuring photographs by Tony Vaccaro, of Abiquiú, her second New Mexican home at Ghost Ranch, and the nearby town of Taos.[25] In the 1960s alone, photographs of O'Keeffe and her distinctive soft minimalism would appear in *House Beautiful*'s 'The Austerity of the Desert Pervades Her Home and Her Work' in April 1963, *House and Garden*'s 'Five Famous Artists in Their Personal Backgrounds' in December 1965, *Atlantic Monthly*'s 'Georgia O'Keeffe' in April 1965, *Vogue*'s 'O'Keeffe: Her Extraordinary Contribution to Twentieth-Century Art ... Obscured by Her Fame' in March 1967, and *Life*'s 'Horizons of a Pioneer' in March 1968.[26] Laura Gilpin's article in *House Beautiful* is representative of the general tenor of description and analysis of O'Keeffe at this time, but also into the present. As one of the first publications documenting O'Keeffe's life at Abiquiú to feature photographs, the republication of the article on the *House Beautiful* website in March 2023 demonstrates both the lasting and renewed interest in the artist's architectural aesthetics in recent years. Consisting largely of a visual description of the home and its surroundings, sprinkled among these descriptions are what are by now familiar pronouncements about the emotional and tactical value of O'Keeffe's décor and minimalist styling.

> Most of life's petty frustrations are eliminated from Miss O'Keeffe's existence. She has reduced her life to fundamental essentials and those things that mean the most to her. The very objects with which she surrounds herself take on an added beauty by the way she arranges and places them. Such is the home, the life, the work of Georgia O'Keeffe, one of America's great painters.[27]

The O'Keeffe that emerged from these photographs and articles was not a sexual savant; instead, she was part cowgirl and part desert mystic, part Buddhist pilgrim and part high priestess of the American artistic avant-garde. In these publications, it would appear that O'Keeffe's

attempts to use architectural photography and interior design successfully redefined her public persona. But these victories would prove impermanent. Indeed, the 1960s, which saw the first substantial mainstream publicisation of her life and home in Abiquiú, would see sexualised readings of her paintings and person recede.[28] But by the following decade, the old O'Keeffe mythos would re-emerge at the hands of 1970s feminists, who upheld her work as a paragon of feminine sexual consciousness.[29] While the apparent necessity of a number of more recent feminist interventions into O'Keeffe's story — including a 2016 retrospective of the artist's paintings at the Tate — would suggest that O'Keeffe was unsuccessful in any subsequent attempts to neutralise her sexualised image, photographs of Abiquiú's interior spaces certainly built out additional scenery to the world that her sexual myth has come to inhabit across the later twentieth century and into the present.[30]

Beyond tethering O'Keeffe to a wider range of human archetypes that might recuperate her public persona, these images would also occasionally suggest something stranger. After her guests stepped out of Abiquiú's doors, walked across its gravel drive, and steered away along the ribbon of US Highway 84 that connected the world to the artist, they would edit, print, and publish images that would compress her into a new kind of woman — a construction of body, photograph, and domestic interior.

As Sparke contends in the thesis to her 2008 book, *The Modern Interior*, the domestic interior of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has always been embroiled in 'its simultaneous commitment to two, often opposing, sets of values denoting modern private domesticity and public life [... and] its familiarity with the ever-increasing demands of the mass media.'[31] Like the celebrity home tours that fill periodicals like *Architectural Digest*, the Abiquiú photo-archive collapses the line between public and private, as well as self and structure. While plenty of photographs show O'Keeffe in the frame, it is when she exits the frame that the most curious and influential transfiguration takes place. These figure-less images create a quasi-equivalence between O'Keeffe and her desert vistas, her home, and the various decorative vignettes that compose its interiors. In these images, her space becomes endowed with human qualities and virtues, which in turn lend her the qualities of objecthood and the decorative motif. This mirroring effect is the most consequential legacy of the Abiquiú home. Its photographs have eroticised a way of imaginative occupation where the distinction between inhabitant and habitation is made tantalisingly fragile. It is a promiscuity of embodiment, which scholar Anne Anlin Cheng has described as 'experiencing the porousness between persons and things, the alluring satisfaction of ontological shallowness.'[32] In the decorative paradigm of soft minimalism, we find this porous, hybrid figure has been lent a particular ascetic flavour.

Of course, O'Keeffe lived in a different media era to the digital one we know today. In some respects, her personhood was challenged and transformed in ways that were not significantly different to those of aristocratic figures of the early nineteenth century, for instance, who were subject to constant depiction in paintings, coinage, and monuments. However, it is perhaps the shift from O'Keeffe's time to the contemporary era of mass photographic mediation that explains the movement of her domestic aesthetics from margin to mainstream. In other words, it may only be with the introduction of digital images and the totalising media sphere they have created that the sensorial, psychic, and techno-psychic conditions were implemented at scale that make her aesthetics deeply desirable in our time.

Today, digital images of architecture invite other forms of engagement than our imaginative inhabitation. They are covetable, collectible objects that may adorn our online personas through acts of digital gleaning. Collected on design research platforms such as Pinterest, Are.na, or Instagram,

they become either points of reference for possible constructions or scaffolds for one's performative identity.[33] In a sense, all images organised within the defined bounds of a given user or company's digital presence functionally become 'selfies' — even without the 'self' being literally imaged. This kind of multimedia personhood built from architectural imagery and location-based data is one manifestation of the 'spatial self.'[34] Raz Schwartz and Germaine Halegoua deploy this term to describe productions of selfhood, '(both online and offline) where individuals document, archive, and display their experience and/or mobility within space and place in order to represent or perform aspects of their identity to others.'[35]

As it once was for O'Keeffe, for social media aesthetes today, interior architectural photography is a key material in which an extended, ambiguously private/public self is built out, rhizomatically, from the source subject across flesh and image. And depending upon the collection of formal and narrative qualities of the architectural images themselves, such photographs also function as carriers of a range of imagined values and, further, act as prompts that inspire shifts in our own self-image.

The magic of Abiquiú and its aesthetics lie in the ways in which, through the home's transformation into media artifacts, O'Keeffe forged a fantastic morphological continuity between herself and photographic space, and between herself and the varied meanings and imaginations the materials of the soft minimalist vernacular encode. Soft minimalism's real operating theatre may at times be our homes, prompting us to redecorate or rebuild, but its main target is our self-image. In adopting its aesthetics, we seek to become as crisp and quiet as a white coverlet pulled taut across a bed bathed in desert sun, and silent and still as an empty, wind-worn rock garden. These digital images today encrypt our own dream to become skeletal, sun-worn, and slight, a figure composed of flesh, pixels, and adobe walls. Such transformation fantasies offer imaginative channels through which contemporary subjects can both resist and concede to the cognitive conditions that suffuse digitally mediated life.

Soft minimalism both reflects and defends against a number of transformations that digital media has wrought upon the contemporary self. With its irregularity of surfaces, tactility, and vague historicity, O'Keeffe's 'soft minimalism' is today consumed as a somewhat ironic solution to a number of contemporary ills, from the fatigue of mass standardisation in America, the simulacra of digitally mediated life, and the estrangement of the embodied self from both its labour and its social bonds under global digital capitalism.[36]

For both O'Keeffe and for us today, the aesthetics of soft minimalism take the now pervasive capitalist imperative to externalise the self into a consumable, self-branded product, and transmute it into a more historically grounded, 'natural', and healthful posture. The collapse of self, image, and space that images of Abiquiú effortlessly produce — and that the digital marketplace of endless personal branding now demands and rewards — is recast as a noble act of self-mastery, one at an intersection between spiritually and corporeally purifying and thrillingly vertiginous. Put another way, soft minimalist spatial styling allows us to be of technological capitalism while still appearing to stand, sun-kissed on a desert ridge, just beyond it. Further, in its locationally and historically ambiguous 'timelessly past' aesthetic universe, soft minimalism also offers, as minimalist styling tends to do, an imagined escape from the endless agitations of novelty and fashion, a permanent, restful perch from which to perform our aesthetic identity without need for revision. As fashion scholar YeSeung Lee notes, 'both minimalist and anti-fashion stances pursue the absolute, the last word, the final judgement, which may be a "timeless" style or a total rejection of style.'[37]

The soft minimalist image is populated by materials, objects, and arrangements that come

from pre-digital times and often code for a range of attractive values at risk of endangerment in the digital age. Accordingly, as we adopt its aesthetic matrix of modern furnishings, antiques, folk crafts, building materials, and organic artifacts, we are surreptitiously endowed with their qualities of health, presence, and vague sacrality — in other words, the sense that we have rescued some part of our pre-digital selves. Soft minimalism's spread is fueled both by nostalgia for the value of objects and materials from our pasts (real and imagined) and, paradoxically, by their usefulness in constructing an aestheticised identity marketable to the social media sphere. In other words, the aesthetics of soft minimalism are, simultaneously, an imagined means of escaping our diminished and cognitively exhausted experience of contemporary reality *and* crude shorthands for performing an ennobled, humble, earth-bound self in the digital ether.[38]

Abiquiú's original synthesis of disparate references, and the home's transformation from a derelict hacienda to an abstract entity at the seam of architecture, image, and body, may have helped O'Keeffe to heal a wound unique to the artist's particular life of mediatisation. And while her relationship to mass media and to various capitalist imperatives to author her own creative mythology is a subject of historians' speculation, I offer that her camera-friendly aesthetics have been adopted today because they both shield us against mediation and depersonalisation, while also allowing us to play with these conditions. In this way, we discover a strange purpose for the 'double interior' — parallelism: 'as a space, as an image', and as a mechanism for imaginative self-reformation.[39]

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biography

Chris Fernald is a scholar and production designer based in the U.S. and Europe. He has recently presented his scholarship at the University of Edinburgh, the Architectural Humanities Research Association (UK), and the Clark Art Institute, among other institutions. He received his MA in Art History from Williams College in 2022.

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image as moment

Gillian Treacy
University of Edinburgh
0000-0002-3067-4423

If an interior is a 'necessary dimension that turns architectural space into a liveable place with a given stability, desirable order, readable cultural hierarchy, and individuality', then an image of an interior becomes a moment when this dimension is revealed.[1] As a building 'receives its cultural significance' through its interior, we begin to understand this elusive (fragile) dimension between the liveable place, the inhabitants and ourselves.[2] This shifting dimension between self and space expresses our individual and shared cognisance of a place and enriches our understanding of the interior context holistically. A moment, defined as a very short, indefinite period, an instant, significant, or current point in time, as revealed in the images we record, provides insights into the lives of the inhabitants of these interiors through unveiling cultural nuance, affording historical value, and expressing a distinct positioning or agenda.[3] Therefore, a moment, articulated by our own multifaceted perspectives and readings of situations, may feel transient and elusive. Yet we can, and have, captured these moments within the images included in the following pages. By initiating and recording their moment of force, engaging the pivot point centrally within our gaze, each image invites and provokes us to grasp a transitory, yet not insignificant, moment, within an interior.

Our perception and relationship to interiors, extracted as moments, can be understood as multi-dimensional, complex, and freeform, demanding multi-lateral or parallel approaches and considerations in our investigation of them. The images presented are created through a range of means, from tactile interventions and making to on-site research, scale model-making, archival and desktop image, and text sourcing and experimental writing. Rather than simple representations, these images seek to realise tracings of the 'nothingness' described by Paul Valéry — the underlying depth of interior constructs revealed in the moments of stories, concepts, and abstract thought, giving meaning to our existence and activities, implying that they are experienced through both spatial and image-based conditions.[4]

Using diverse approaches with often surprising and juxtaposed experimental and traditional research methods, the following abstracts discuss images of the interior as the result of tangled, embodied relationships between self, place, and space. They demand that we pause for a moment, to imagine the space between ourselves and the interior images we choose to uncover.

The methodologies used in the constructing of the images range from scientific representation modelled through interior atmospheres, to evolving cultural narratives, grounded in the methodology of ambivalence. These approaches seek to share the experience of the image-makers by analysing and embracing variable

cite as:
Gillian Treacy, 'Image As Moment', *Idea Journal*, 23.2 (2026), pp. 57–65, doi.org/10.37113/ij.v23i2.662.

conditions, as mixed feelings of shifting social and personal stances, many of which are contradictory in their outcome.[5] Additionally, the various means used to collect these images in all cases serve to employ positive opportunities for each given scenario: the archival database of photographs and letters, the camera's manual and automated functions, a binaural head, a drone, a maker of traditional Indian Rangoli, a real estate videographer, a robotic vacuum, and Maestro the cat's collar. Each investigation describes a human and more-than-human engagement with the interior and encourages performative and affective shared experiences, exploring perceptions in the interior, reimagined.

The images are accompanied by diverse writing practices: site-writing practices, archival research, and performance writing that engage with interiors. Each allows us to glimpse significant moments and insights into the historical past of the interior. For instance, holistic understanding of the place, site, and experience of the lived interior is portrayed by polyvocal forms of writing practice alongside image references. Physical scale models used to facilitate spatial experimentation recorded as 360° panoramic photos for virtual reality, captured inside the model, enable immersive analysis of spatial perception, notably integrating daylight as a dynamic element in shaping atmosphere and understanding through moments of time. Finally, the physical making of a rug, and the tactile textures of Rangoli as a practice, offers images that evoke cultural memories of two places, creating a faceted bridge of moments between identity, self, and place.

These images create and evoke stories, ways, and approaches to living each moment. Defined by current cultural representation and awareness or historical remnants, they provide new ways of seeing. Each image notices and records a significant moment (albeit, some of these pertaining to ambivalence), through our multi-dimensional interactions with spaces. While sometimes nuanced, and always speculative, the use of image and moving image to capture these moments allows 'recognition of their interdependence spatially and experientially.'[6] They define a historical 'moment' within our personal and shared cultural narratives, our evolving relationships to places, the fleeting nature of our imagining of spaces, and the benefit of a momentary pause.

a new image for interior and interiority

Suzie Attiwill



Figure 01.
interiorisation – folding of the outside – doubling – modulation – sensation – contraction – haecceity

latitude 42°52′50″ south, longitude147°19′41.24″ east

3.36pm, 12 April 2021

Domain House, opened 1850, Nipaluna, Hobart.

a window selects and folds outside in; semi-gloss paint on wall from act of restoration interrupts the past and passing present

The doubleness of the relationship between self and space is cited as a key aspect of the emergence of 'the interior' and continues to be a refrain in 'the interior' and interior design practice.[7] Theories and histories of 'the interior' and interior design describe this relation as one of representation; the interior as an image and imagining of the inhabitant and the world in which they live.[8]

This expresses the relational aspect of interior design. What if we give emphasis to this openness as distinct from the architectural and enclosed space? What if we pause in the making of relations and resist — even if temporarily — the move to representation?

This image is not to be read as meaning something nor a condition of interpretation, a representation nor illustration, but differently, as an image of thought — a concept of doubling as a folding of the outside that produces an interior, an interiorisation. This is not presented as an alternative to representation and therefore a different kind of image and imagining. Instead, it highlights representation as an interiorisation where the relation with the outside becomes one that fixes the outside and holds in place to establish certainty, stability, and identity for the inhabitant.

A new image for interior and interiority as interiorisation of an outside, making visible invisible forces, sensations, vibrations.[9] It uses processes of contraction and framing where regimes of representation and recognition become apparent as secondary and, in turn, this invites experimentation in making relations other than ones caught up in assumptions of individuals and space with an 'I' at the centre as producer of experience. It offers a new image for interior and interiority — a movement-image — open in an exterior of change and contingency.

the missing case of c. winifred harley: the architecture of progressive education at dartington hall school

Kieran Mahon

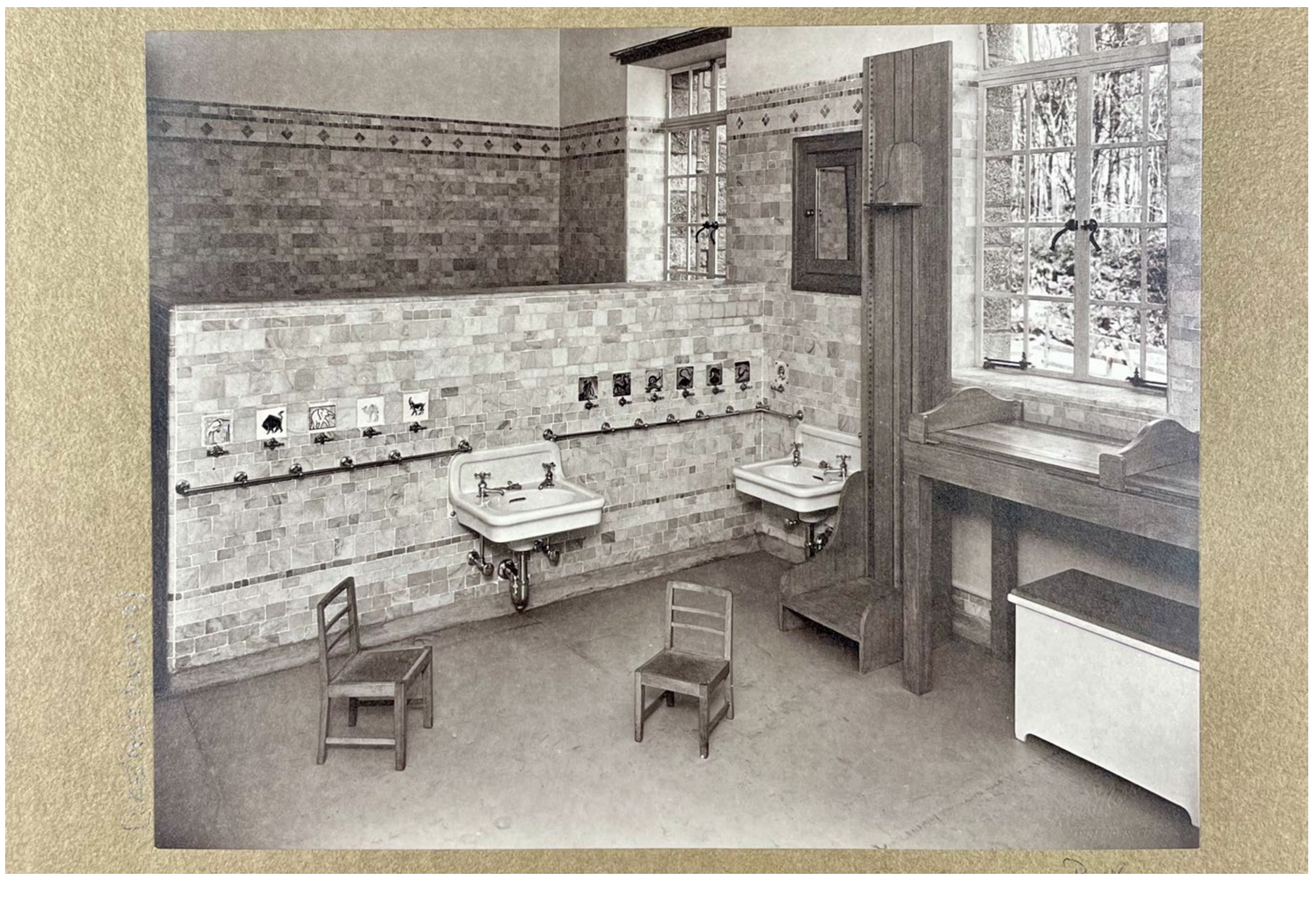

Figure 02.
Washroom (1931). This washroom was situated in the original nursery school building at Dartington Hall School, Devon, England. Designed by architect Ides van der Gracht in collaboration with C. Winifred Harley. Photographer: Leonard K. Elmhirst. Archive reference: LKE/PH/2/N.

How might writing practices be diversified to address historical silences and reimagine lost interiors? I address this question in response to the 'Imagining the unseen' theme. To do this, I present an extract of my research on the architecture of progressive education at Dartington Hall School in Devon, England (1926–87). The internationally celebrated co-educational boarding school initially boasted some of the most modern and specialised educational architecture in the country. Until now, however, historians have not focused on its designed environments, many of which are lost or forgotten.

I share the story of C. Winifred Harley, a pioneering but overlooked early years educator who was employed by Dartington to advise on the design of its first purpose-built educational facility. To restore Harley's agency in the design process — as well as to understand the interiors — I offer a creative, layered writing approach that places the marginalised voices of neglected staff or forgotten students alongside the traditionally more dominant ones of headmaster or architect. The method, drawn from site-writing practices and archival research, is a response to Dartington's own innovations in the field of performance writing and explores an embodied relationship with place and space.

Through the work, I argue that polyvocal forms of writing are a vital mechanism for generating more diverse and holistic understandings of interiors and the communities that use them. On one hand, a greater breadth of academic writing styles creates opportunities for readers to engage with texts that may otherwise be shut out. On the other, the approach reflects the progressive desire to develop the whole learner through interactive and expressive forms of education. The approach has important implications for making built environment practices more inclusive by prompting designers and policymakers to recentre marginalised voices and foster multiple ways of knowing.

re-lofting: profoundly — an exploration of the duped with/in an artist's loft

Jenny Hogarth



Figure 03.
Re-lofting (2025) digital print

This image is a teaser for the forthcoming multi-channel artwork 'Profoundly Moving' (2026) exploring the sensory experience of the artist's loft. Emphasising posthuman perspectives and concepts of 'doubleness', the work reveals the layered complexity of this re-imagined space. The methodology of ambivalence used for filming exposes intricate ties between symbolic capitalism and auto-theoretical feminist art practice.

A binaural head, drone, and real estate videographer operated alongside cameras on a robotic vacuum and Maestro the cat's collar, bringing the loft's dynamic and immanent relations to life. These human and more-than-human elements foster an onto-epistemological engagement with the interior — a becoming-with the space — while acknowledging its resemblance to other imagined environments.

'Profoundly Moving' echoes the structural film 'Wavelength', featuring nostalgic clichés of an imagined New York art scene and a similarly formal premise. Unlike 'Wavelength's' detached progressive zoom towards a photograph, 'Profoundly Moving' playfully employs multiple perspectives of a towering cat-tree assembled from Donald Judd furniture and imitation Kim Kardashian shapewear.[10] Notably, Kardashian is embroiled in a lawsuit from the Judd Foundation for claiming her SKIMS office furniture is authentic Judd.[11] A dinner party for feminists unfolds around a replica of the replica Mansana table, highlighting the interior's duplicitous elements. One guest portrays a Kardashian-esque 'mirror-world' version of the artist, disrupting the bourgeois setting, provoking uncertainty about what is authentic and admirable. These allegories of gentrification serve as the film's focal point.

The film emphasises performative and affective shared experiences, exploring perception in reimagined interiors. By employing 'doubleness' and engaging with objects (cameras, vacuum) and other-than-human animals (Maestro) through embodied moving-image, it offers insights into how spatial atmospheres are co-produced and perceived and encourages a rethinking of their existential hierarchy. This intra-active entanglement challenges traditional and current notions of power and oppression in art. It is a reminder of our complicity — perhaps it's not as profoundly moving as we imagined.

imagining interiors: perception of light and spatial atmosphere

Anette Kreutzberg and Karina Mose



Figure 04.
Mathilde Juul Ipsen and Louise Aght Lindstrøm, photo from 3rd semester Master project: 'Fra civil til patient'.

The image is part of a series documenting the findings in a Master's project studying and developing a new design within a medical consultation. Physical scale models were used to facilitate spatial experimentation throughout the project period and a detailed 1:10 scale model was created for the final documentation of findings instead of renderings from the digital model.

Inside the model, 360° panoramic photos for VR were captured, enabling immersive analysis of spatial perception with views from various patient and practitioner positions, emphasising human-centred design and integrating daylight as a dynamic element in shaping atmosphere. A mobile phone with voice control placed inside the scale model provided supplementary perspective views conveying the abstraction and aesthetics of the physical scale model for communicating the project without VR.

Human perception of light is an important part of teaching lighting at The Royal Danish Academy. The fundamental understanding of light is a prerequisite for using light as an architectural design element. Learning to see light distribution and qualities comes with practice, observing and analysing light in the real world.

We are privileged in having a fully functional analogue Light Lab with a mirror box, an artificial sky, and a moveable heliodon sun to supplement the digital simulation tools. For decades the facilities have supported teaching in daylight and have been used by students for experimenting and developing their designs with scale models by directly observing distribution and qualities of physical light in three-dimensional space without digital mediation.

The digital model and its photo-real rendered image output can also represent perceived light distribution and qualities in a space, provided that the student has sufficient digital skills as well as a fundamental understanding of light. The latter is achieved by practise in the real world outside the computer.

‘rangknit’: knitting (a)way home

Pooja Shah



Figure 05.
‘RangKnit’: Knitting (a)way Home

You may wonder why am I sleeping in the knitted artefact? What’s the story and what does it mean?

For I, a migrant from India, residing in the UK for the past twelve years, still feel that I am a stranger and that I do not belong here. I miss my home and the rituals/practices that I used to perform back in India. I always craved a sense of belonging and, to my surprise, knitting practice became a tool that I could use to feel at home — a practice that had potential to not only sit within domesticity but also challenge the notion of forming an interior space that embodies cultural memory and identity.

Through my PhD, I brought Rangoli, a cultural practice that I performed in India while growing up, into the UK context, transferring the knowledge and memories associated with it into another cultural practice of the UK — knitting. Knitting then became a tool to allow for social remittances to happen, to form myself a community, a home.

Rupi Kaur, an Indo-Canadian poet, beautifully describes:

> they have no idea what it’s like
>
> to lose home at the risk of
>
> never finding home again
>
> to have your entire life
>
> split between two lands and you become the bridge between the two countries[12]

Hence, when I lie in this knitted artefact called ‘Home’, its scale reminds me of my bedroom in India; the colour palette reminds me of the spices I used in the kitchen; the warmth of wool when wrapped around my arms reminds me of family evenings with tea; and the folding and unfolding of it with others in the UK reminds me of packing and unpacking my suitcase to leave home. The piece, therefore, in a poetic sense initiates a conversation on moving (a)way home — my home, their home, our home in the UK — making us all belong together.

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author biographies

Dr Gillian Treacy
University of Edinburgh
0000-0002-3067-4423
Dr Gillian Treacy worked as an architect and architectural lighting designer internationally before becoming a Lecturer in Edinburgh School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture. Her research intersects and connects spatial lighting design and the advancing field of physiological sciences with phenomenology to enhance interior environments and lived experiences.

Dr Suzie Attiwill
RMIT University
0000-0001-8238-6784
Dr Suzie Attiwill is Professor of Interior Design, RMIT University, Australia. She is committed to positioning the criticality and value of interior designing through reframing concepts of interior and interiority. She supervises PhD candidates participating in the RMIT Practice Research Symposia in Melbourne, Barcelona and Saigon.

Dr Kieran Mahon
University of the Arts London
0000-0002-0868-7818
Dr Kieran Mahon is History and Theory Coordinator for BA Interior and Spatial Design at Camberwell College of Arts. His research interests include creative research methods, histories of progressive educational space, and cross-disciplinary collaborative practice.

Jenny Hogarth
University of Edinburgh
0009-0005-4337-6520
Jenny Hogarth is an artist and educator based in Edinburgh. Exhibition commissions include: Talbot Rice (Edinburgh); GI (Glasgow); Phillips (NY); Frieze Projects; Serpentine; Tate Britain (London).

Anette Kreutzberg
Royal Danish Academy
0000-0003-0590-815X
Anette Kreutzberg is an Associate Professor at Royal Danish Academy Institute of Architecture and Space, and a member of The Architectural Lighting cluster and cluster for Architectural Representation.

Karina Mose
Royal Danish Academy
0000-0002-7254-6622
Karina Mose is an Associate Professor at the Institute of Architecture and Space researching the relationships and representation of light, colour, material, and form, and exploring light as a narrative medium, including representation techniques and digital and analogue models, addressing both real and imagined light in architectural environments and luminaire design.

Pooja Shah
De Montfort University
0009-0009-7313-7220
Dr. Pooja Shah is a lecturer in Interior design and practice-led researcher. Her doctoral research addresses complex socio-cultural issues around the concept of home and belonging by examining how cultural practices adapt across borders. Her teaching involves hands-on making to support inclusive, reflective and materially engaged approaches to interior design.

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2 Vlad Ionescu, 'The Interior as Interiority', *Humanities & Social Sciences Communications*, 4 (2018), p. 33.

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looking-beyond-seeing: the interwar interior as mediated

Vanessa Vanden Berghe
Chelsea College of Arts, London, UAL
0009-0003-6258-7273

abstract

In his article on the houses of the designer Oliver Hill (1887–1968) for the magazine *Country Life*, the architectural historian John Cornforth suggested that it was only through the experience of Hill's domestic settings that it would be possible to get an understanding of his approach to interior design. While the primacy of lived experience cannot be ignored, mediated images offer an equally valid and productive means of understanding interwar interiors. Through close examination of interwar press photographs, such as images of Hill's dining room at Chantrey House, London (1924), this essay examines how photography is approached not merely as representation but as a mediating and performative object through which aesthetic intention, social performance, and sensory suggestion converge.

The following text provides a methodological framework, entitled *Looking-beyond-Seeing*, based on material and affective readings of the photographed interior. Within this framework, the photograph is understood not as a deficient surrogate for lost space but as a mediating surface through which spatial, social, and sensory relations can be reconstructed. Repositioning mediation as an analytical opportunity, rather than a form of loss, it shows how staged interior photographs are able to generate nuanced knowledge of interwar domestic environments beyond the limits of direct physical access.

keywords

photography; interwar period; mediation; domestic interiors

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introduction

During the interwar period (the years between the Armistice of November 1918 and the German attack on Poland in September 1939), well-known designers such as Oliver Hill (1887–1968) sought to work with the best photographers of the time. Partnerships with photographers such as Dell and Wainwright, Millar and Harris, and Frank Yerbury resulted in the creation of the best possible shot, which played a key role in selling modern design to the public, an awareness of which is as important today as it was then. Architects and photographers became increasingly skilled in producing images that responded to the needs of multiple stakeholders, including designers seeking professional recognition, clients seeking social distinction, and magazines seeking compelling visual material. Photography thus became integral to how interiors were presented, circulated, and understood.

When it comes to the study of the interwar interior, these mediated images are often the only access we have to designs that were produced during this time. Examining the interactions between the interior-as-space and the interior-as-staged, as observed in the published image, offers a productive means to expand our understanding of the interwar interior. Using the domestic work of Hill as a case study, this analysis starts from the premise that interior spaces, though no longer available to us in any physical form, can, with validity, be assessed through their representation in the contemporary press.

The assumption that mediation necessarily constitutes loss is challenged by understanding staged interior photographs as mediating objects that actively construct spatial, social, and sensory meaning. Rather than treating these images as substitutes for direct experience, they can be approached as sites where aesthetic intention, editorial framing, and social performance converge. The photograph operates not simply as a passive record but as a structured interface between private interior space and public visual circulation.

To address this interpretative potential, *Looking-beyond-Seeing* is proposed as a methodological framework for analysing interior photography. This approach begins from a reading of the interior photograph, understood as a produced and circulated object shaped by photographic technique, editorial framing, and publication context. From this position, two interrelated stages of analysis are undertaken. First, a material reading attends closely to the spatial and decorative cues visible within the photograph itself. Second, an affective reading draws on contemporary sources to interpret the sensory and social atmospheres suggested by the image. Taken together, these stages position the photograph as a mediating surface through which spatial and experiential conditions can be interpretatively reconstructed.

Published photographs of Hill's dining room at Chantrey House, London (1924), serve as a case study through which the interior can be examined as both represented space and mediated image. Approaching the photograph as an object in its own right allows Hill's interior to be understood not as a fixed or inaccessible environment, but as a dynamic spatial condition that continues to operate through its photographic mediation. Through this framework, staged interior photographs emerge not as inadequate surrogates for lost interiors but as essential sites for understanding the spatial, social, and cultural dynamics of the interwar domestic environment.

Looking-beyond-Seeing therefore also shares affinities with methodologies developed within visual and cultural studies. For instance, Stuart Hall's work on understanding the relationship between the reader and the image, Gillian Rose's emphasis on images acquiring meaning through being embedded in the social world, or Nicholas Mirzoeff's emphasis on visuality as social practice.[1] Each of these reinforces the importance of examining interior photographs not only as representations but also as mediated objects whose meanings emerge through production, circulation, and viewing.

interwar photography and its visual dissemination

In Britain, a variety of journals and magazines, such as *The Architectural Review*, *Ideal Home*, *Country Life*, *Vogue*, and *The Studio*, rapidly expanded the dissemination of professionally photographed and seductive images of newly built architecture and interiors, shaping how design was encountered by both professional and popular audiences. The photograph thus functioned as a record of interior space and as an essential medium through which interiors entered public and cultural discourse.

For the historian of the interwar interior, such photographs often constitute the primary surviving point of access. When working with this material, it is important to emphasise that the interiors under discussion are realised, finished, and published settings. Because the majority of images and texts were produced for publication, or circulated within printed media, the roles of consumption and mediation must be considered alongside the production of these interiors. Approaching published images of Hill's work as designed objects in their own right opens them up to historical analysis. Rather than functioning as transparent records, photographs must be understood as mediating channels through which interiors were communicated, interpreted, and encountered. In this sense, the published photograph operates between producer and consumer, shaping how Hill's interiors were understood by contemporary audiences.

The Production–Consumption–Mediation (PCM) paradigm, as developed by Grace Lees-Maffei, provides a useful framework for analysing these relationships.[2] Lees-Maffei identifies mediation as a third stream in design history, alongside production and consumption, emphasising the importance of channels such as magazines, photographs, and other forms of visual and textual communication in shaping how design is understood and experienced.[3] Crucially, mediation does not simply transmit meaning but actively participates in its construction. Mediating channels themselves are designed and therefore constitute objects of design historical analysis, while simultaneously shaping consumption practices and ideas about design. This PCM paradigm thus shifts attention away from a sole emphasis on the production of interiors toward the processes through which they were circulated, represented, and interpreted.

Previous research on Hill has primarily examined his interiors through the lens of production, focusing on authorship, stylistic development, and design intention.[4] While these approaches remain essential, the PCM paradigm highlights the importance of examining how Hill's interiors were mediated through publication and subsequently consumed by readers. The photographic image, as published in journals and magazines, functioned not merely as documentation but as a mediating device that structured the viewer's encounter with the interior. The meanings of Hill's interiors were therefore formed through their design and physical execution and through their photographic representation and circulation.

Production, consumption, and mediation do not operate as separate or sequential stages. Rather, as Lees-Maffei argues, these three core issues co-exist and overlap, forming an interconnected framework for understanding design.[5] Hill's interiors were produced in dialogue with clients, mediated through photography and publication, and consumed visually and imaginatively by readers. The photograph thus becomes a critical site where these processes intersect, positioning the interior within a broader network of representation and reception.

Within this context, the photographed interior exists simultaneously as physical space and mediated image. As Charles Rice has described, this condition produces a 'doubled interior', which he defined as 'an interior that is consciously understood as both an image and a spatial condition.'[6] The photograph does not merely reproduce the interior but actively participates in its construction as a spatial and cultural entity. Through processes of mediation

and consumption, the interior acquires a second mode of existence within print culture, where it is encountered, interpreted, and imaginatively inhabited by viewers. The 'doubled interior' therefore emerges through the interrelationship between production, mediation, and consumption, rather than through representation alone. Approaching Hill's interiors through the PCM paradigm allows the photographed interior to be understood not as a secondary representation, but as an integral component in the historical formation, circulation, and experience of the interwar domestic interior.

This mediated condition of the interior forms the basis for the methodological framework of *Looking-beyond-Seeing*, through which the photograph can be approached as a mediating surface connecting spatial, social, and experiential dimensions. The relationship between the material and affective readings proposed through this methodology need not be understood in a single way. In some instances, the two readings operate in parallel, allowing the researcher to attend separately to the material properties of the photographed interior and the sensory or social qualities it suggests. Such parallel readings remain valuable because they preserve the specificity of different forms of evidence and interpretation. At the same time, the framework also permits a diffractive mode of analysis, in which material and affective dimensions are read through one another. Following this approach, reflective surfaces for instance become entangled with practices of domestic labour, lighting strategies with social hierarchies, and photographic absences with the presence of bodies excluded from representation. *Looking-beyond-Seeing* therefore accommodates both parallel and diffractive readings, recognising that different interpretative contexts may produce different forms of knowledge from the same image.

fear of the mediated image

Writing in 1910, the architect Adolf Loos (1870–1933) warned the readers of his article 'Architecture' that 'a true building makes no impression as a picture, reduced to two dimensions.'[7] Loos continued that it was 'my greatest pride that the interiors which I have created are completely lacking in effect when photographed; that the people who live in them do not recognize their own apartments from the photographs.'[8] This lack of effect was, according to Loos, due to the context in which these images were encountered.[9] As Beatriz Colomina later observed:

> The inhabitants of a house perceive it as an environment, not as an object, whereas a photograph of a house published in an architectural journal requires a different kind of attention, which presupposes a certain distance and is therefore closer to the contemplation of a work of art in a museum.[10]

As John Potvin more recently highlighted, 'The modern interior was a product of a mass image and of claims that architecture was less a physical site than a sight — or image — to behold through cinema, periodicals, photographs, theatre, and important exhibitions.'[11] Photography thus transforms the interior from immersive environment into visual object, shifting the terms under which it is experienced. For Loos it was therefore impossible to recreate a spatial effect and its sensation within the context of photography, as photographs simply draw the viewer's attention to the artifice that is involved in making the photograph.[12]

This artifice Loos referred to might also have been experienced by Hill's clients, gazing back at their own interiors as published on the pages of many popular magazines. The assortment of journals, magazines, and newspapers encompassing wide-ranging subjects from architecture, through decorative art, to women's interests, meant that Hill's work reached a wide variety of audiences. A positive communication with the magazine's audience was key. How this played out can be seen in editorial approaches by comparing the drawing room of Hill's Gayfere House, London, as it was published in the *Architectural Review* [Fig. 01] and in *Country*

Life [Fig. 02].[13] Dell and Wainwright (working for the *Architectural Review*) have emptied the interior to better display the highly reflective surfaces of the spatial elements, while A. E Henson (working as a photographer for *Country Life*) privileged the furnishing and decoration of the interior, therefore creating a different atmosphere with the same interior.[14] Comparisons such as these are invaluable in highlighting the different stakeholders at play in the mediated image, and clients would certainly have recognised the gap between their lived interiors and the images of them in magazines.



Figure 01.
View of the Drawing Room at Gayfere House for *The Architectural Review*. O. Hill, Gayfere House, Drawing Room, London, 1931. Photographer: Dell and Wainwright, RIBA Collections.



Figure 02.
View of the Drawing Room at Gayfere House. O. Hill, Gayfere House, London, 1932. Photographer: A. E. Henson, *Country Life*.

Such images foreground the distinction between the interior-as-space and the interior-as-staged. The photographed interior presents an idealised and composed version of domestic space, structured for visual consumption rather than lived use. This constructed quality contributed to the perception that photography could not adequately convey the character of interior environments. The photographed interior appeared to transform the interior from lived setting into aesthetic object, reinforcing concerns regarding its ability to communicate spatial and sensory experience.

Yet it is precisely this shift (from lived environment to visual object) that establishes the photograph as a site of mediation. Rather than simply documenting interior space, photography constructs a new mode of encounter shaped by distance, framing, and interpretation. This recognition raises a critical question: if photography mediates rather than reproduces interior experience, how might its mediating qualities be understood not as limitations but as analytical opportunities?

The necessity of the focus on idealised interiors should not be feared or be seen as problematic. Indeed, it only becomes problematic if photographs are approached as a stable 'fixed' copy of reality. Photography as truth is a clear position or understanding of the photograph, as encountered within photography theory. For Susan Sontag, writing on photography, the act of taking an image means it becomes frozen in time.[15] If we follow this argument through, it would mean that the image we try to analyse would have to be based on our understanding of the exact moment when the image was taken/ fixed, because that moment is seen as the truth.

Approaching the image as frozen in terms of interior design photography during the early twentieth century seems closely related to a Modernist approach towards photography. Within this vein, images such as those used here rely on form, pattern, and repetition. Through the work of photographers such as Dell and Wainwright, audiences were

conditioned to see a certain way. Images such as the dining room at Joldwynds, Holmbury St Mary, Surrey [Fig. 03], highlight the distancing, objectifying, and controlling approach towards vision. As a viewer we remain on the outside, similar to the position required of us when we use a plan. Plans, although useful, will give us very similar results as the use of images in a documentary way, as they will give us the perspective of an 'outsider' from an omniscient elevated position. Such a 'frozen' perspective reduces these images to mere documentation, making more expansive reading difficult.

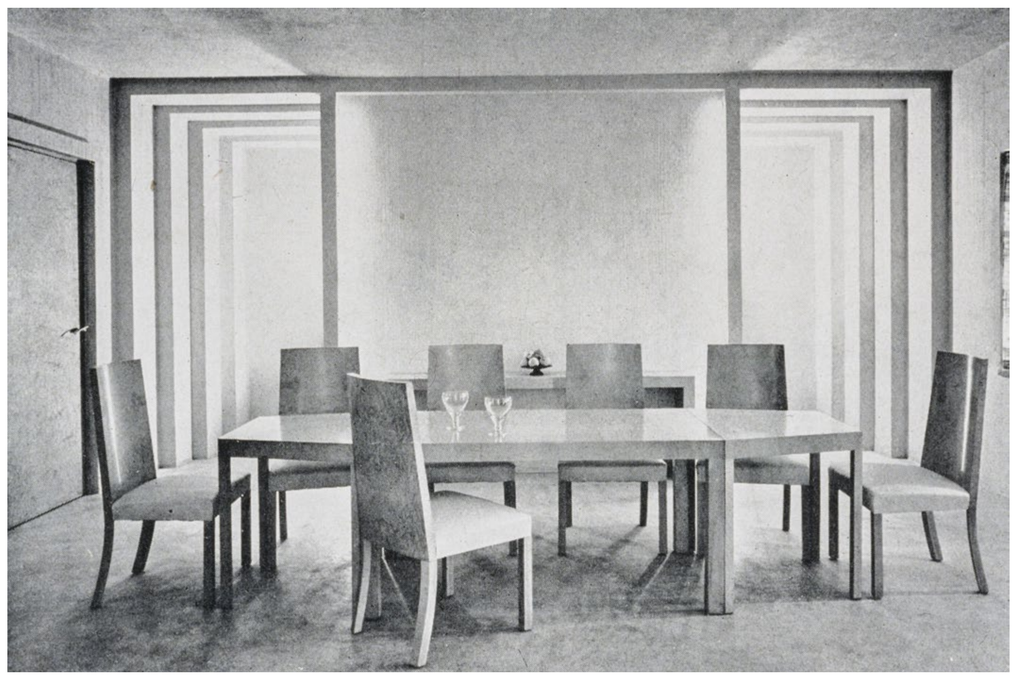

Figure 03.
O. Hill, 'Joldwynds, Holmbury St Mary, Surrey', *The Studio*, 102 (1936), p. 338. Photographers: Dell and Wainwright.

Overall, such an understanding of photography would mean that no other context is possible or truer than the original photographed one. Michelle Henning, on the other hand, proposes to move away from understanding photography as frozen or a 'trace of the real.'[16] She proposes to 'invoke the idea of images as migratory, journeying, wandering, and vagabond, against the grain of a theoretical and historical discussion that tends to represent photographs as static, fixed, and relatively unchanging.'[17]

With this approach in mind, the image of the interior can be understood as a designed object, and therefore as possessing a mediating presence. As Grace Lees-Maffei's PCM paradigm suggests, mediation plays a crucial role in shaping how design is understood and experienced.[18] Consequently, the meaning of the interior cannot be separated from the context in which it is studied. The context is not just 'out there' as something that needs to be reunited with the image for an appropriate interpretation to be possible.[19] Such a view would be detrimental to any study of the photographed interior, as it would pay very little attention to the image's representation and/or the context in which it is studied. Contexts, as Henning further highlights:

> are human constructions, historical interpretations and, ultimately, acts of imagination, but the photograph never arrives entirely context-free; instead it bears the marks of experience even if, as in the digital, electronic transmission of images, the routes are hard to reconstruct.[20]

This shift in understanding has significant implications for the study of interior photography. If photographs are approached as mediating objects rather than fixed documents, their interpretative potential expands. This approach allows us to move away from understanding the photograph through binary conditions of either being 'true or false' but rather as something that interacts with those studying or looking at it.[21]

looking-beyond-seeing: the dining room at chantrey house

Bringing these different layers of knowledge together allows us to approach the photograph of the interior as a window offering different angles and viewpoints onto the domestic setting. Although we remain on one side of this window (we are not allowed in as we would be in virtual reality for instance) *Looking-beyond-Seeing* offers a greater degree of interpretative freedom by moving away from a singular, fixed point of view. This shift allows the researcher to occupy perspectives other than their own, engaging with the interior not simply as an image but as a mediated spatial condition: a 'doubled interior.'[22] In doing so, it invites us to empathise with the

bodies that may once have inhabited these spaces but are now present only through their absence. In images of the dining room at Chantrey House, for instance, what stands out most is not what is shown, but the striking absence of a body that might otherwise occupy the space [Fig. 04].



Figure 04.
O. Hill, 'Chantrey House, London. Dining room', *The Architectural Review*, LV (January–June 1924), p. 59. Photographer: F. R. Yerbury.

The selection of parts of the interior to be made available for viewing in the contemporary press was also of great importance to Hill's clients and crucial to how they performed their identity in relation to class.[23] These idealised interiors enable us to examine how owners displayed their personalities and status through their interiors as published. Through their photographs, Hill and his clients offered the magazine-reading public a curated view and description of certain rooms that best communicated their understanding of self — and how they wished to be understood — without necessarily being present themselves. The rooms that the clients allowed the public to see are staged interiors, which through their mise-en-scène helped the clients to support their identity, not only to those around them, but also to the world outside. The magazine-reading public would therefore only be introduced to those rooms that formed part of the inhabitant's onstage space, similar to what Erving Goffman described as their presentation of self.[24] Photography played a role 'not simply in the creation of subsequent advertising of identity, but also the role it performed in the perpetuation of a distinctly modern lifestyle' as Potvin has highlighted.[25] Readers were usually introduced to spaces such as the hall, living room, dining room, bathroom, and boudoir. Backstage settings such as kitchens, bedrooms, and studies remained largely hidden from the public eye. Therefore readers, much like visitors, are unable to freely view or move throughout the house. There is a clear, albeit invisible, demarcation between what can be seen and what cannot, which Goffman presents as the distinction between the 'front region and the back region'.[26] Creating a link between Hill's domestic designs and stage design is especially important since, as Arnold Aronson points out, both disciplines 'involve the transformation of space, the control of movement through that space, and – through the use of colour, line, texture, volume, and iconography – the communication of information while manipulating the emotional response of spectator-occupants'.[27] The theatrical concept of mise-en-scène is key in the communication between inhabitant and spectator. Furnishing and decoration can be used to investigate how Hill and his clients presented their personalities and status in their photographed domestic environments. Mise-en-scène therefore relates to its physical and psychological connotations. The physical mise-en-scène concerns itself with the staging of the physical environment and the props it contains, while the psychological mise-en-scène works with the physical mise-en-scène to 'elicit an emotional response by influencing our perception of space'.[28]

The dining room at Chantrey House provides a focused case through which to apply the framework of *Looking-beyond-Seeing*. Approached as both representation and mediating object, the photograph allows the interior to be examined not simply as a visual record but as a site where material, social, and sensory dimensions converge. Through this framework, the photograph becomes a point of entry into the spatial, sensory, and social conditions of the interior, allowing us to reconstruct aspects of its experience through interpretative engagement.

Within the context of the Chantrey House dining room we can begin to situate the image within the wider framework of the interwar dinner party. The placement of chairs, candles burned halfway down, and the arrangement of objects on the table act as cues suggesting recent social activity [Fig. 04]. These elements do not simply depict the interior but stage it as an environment structured around use and performance. The image can therefore be understood as an utterance of the dinner party, invoking a social event that extends beyond the limits of the photographic frame. Yet this utterance is not fixed. It deviates, changes, and acquires new meanings each time it is encountered. The photograph is not frozen but operates as an ever-changing citation of a dining room in which a dinner party took place.

It is through this mediated image that the case study of Chantrey House will now be examined using the framework of *Looking-beyond-Seeing*. This involves analysing the photograph across its material, social, and sensory dimensions, recognising it as a mediating object through which the interior was constructed, communicated, and experienced. By attending to the material cues visible within the photograph, the social relations embedded in its staging and circulation, and the atmospheres it suggests, the image becomes accessible as both representation and experiential environment. These material and sensory readings are undertaken through an understanding of the photograph as a mediated object. Through this approach, the photograph allows the interior to be understood as a dynamic spatial and social condition, reconstructed through mediation rather than direct physical access.

looking-beyond-seeing: material reading

Readers of *The Architectural Review* encountering the black and white images of the Chantrey house dining room [Fig. 04 and Fig. 06] were able to recreate the dining room more sensorially in their own minds through the accompanying description letting them know that:

> The table had a glass top sunk in a panel covered with wine coloured foil. The furniture is of silvered wood upholstered in the palest jade colour. The walls of the room are painted and glazed a colour resembling flesh and heather, and the ceiling is covered with a wine and silver foil. The curtains and pelmet round the ceiling are of wine-coloured silk trimmed with metal foil. All these materials would have worked together to enhance the quality of the light.[29]

These materials formed an integrated reflective ensemble structured around the dining table as the spatial and visual centre of the room. The polished glass surface of the table would have greatly enhanced reflections of surrounding materials, amplifying the interaction between light and surface. Reflective table surfaces were not new to the interwar period. Highly finished surfaces can also be seen in portraits of the eighteenth-century middle classes, such as the painting by John Singleton Copley of Mr and Mrs Isaac Winslow (1773), in which the mahogany table nearly resembles a mirror [Fig. 05]. Those viewing the Singleton Copley painting would have understood the Winslows' weighty mahogany table as a sign of 'elite status, social stability, and cultural refinement impervious to the vagaries of fashion or the marketplace.'[30] The patina on the table would have been achieved through years of use and polishing, further adding to the status of this piece of furniture.[31] The mahogany of earlier times, and the glass surface of the table during the interwar

period, would have been interpreted as signs of refinement and wealth. Indeed, Charles Holme (1848–1923), the editor of *The Studio* reviewing Hill's work and his use of glass, wrote, 'Unchanged by the most violent of disinfectants, glass presents its highly polished and richly antiseptic surface to the reflection of polite society.'[32] The gleam of surfaces evoked fashionability while simultaneously signalling cleanliness, control, and modern domestic efficiency. Read through *Looking-beyond-Seeing*, these polished surfaces also point to the often-unseen labour required to maintain them, drawing attention to the servants whose work underpinned the appearance of effortless domesticity.



Figure 05.
John Singleton Copley, *Mr and Mrs Isaac Winslow* (Jemima Debuke), 1773, Museum of Fine Arts Boston, The M. and M. Karolik Collection of Eighteenth-Century American Arts. (39.250), commons Wikimedia [accessed 10 June 2021].

It is also important to highlight that when encountered through photography, the effects of gloss do not disappear but are translated into tonal contrasts, guiding the viewer's eye across the printed image. This is a social interaction, as Monika Wagner has demonstrated in terms of gloss. As a mediating agent, 'gloss operates between an onlooker and reflective surfaces.'[33] Gloss thus mediates not only the lived dinner party but also their photographic afterlife both then and now. Reading shine through *Looking-beyond-Seeing* allows the reflective surface to be understood as more than a decorative finish, as a mediating agent shaping perception, sociability, and photographic reception. Through this reading, gloss emerges as event rather than surface: a dynamic interplay of material, light, labour, and social performance that extended Hill's interior beyond its physical boundaries into the realms of perception and mediation.

By the mid 1920s the public would have become acclimatised to product advertising and Hollywood star portraiture. Photographers such as Cecil Beaton (1904–1980) were at the forefront of this mode of photography, which 'consisted of sharp focus, high contrast, artificial lighting, and simplified backgrounds.'[34] Indeed, the shifting relationship between light and darkness was an intrinsic characteristic of the imagery of the interwar period, as Ruth Hommelen has highlighted, and photographs, architectural or other, are key witnesses of this shift.[35] The play between light and shadow in the images of Hill's interiors used in this research gives the viewer an understanding of overall scale, as it allows for the representation of three-dimensionality.

As with Hollywood star portraiture, images such as those of the dining room at Chantrey House were meant to arouse desire and excitement among magazine-reading audiences. Using the language of glamour similar to the star language of Hollywood, Hill and the magazine editors sought to entice both readers and potential consumers with their staged environments. These images allowed audiences to 'put themselves in the picture' even though most of them would never be able to afford a Hill commission.[36] These depicted interiors can in turn be linked to John Berger's discussion of the publicity image.[37] Further, the articles published on Hill's work should also be seen as advertisements for a lifestyle. The images present us with things that are to be envied, which, according to Berger, is what constitutes glamour.[38] Publicity, Berger continues, is about social relations, not objects. Its promise is not of pleasure, but of happiness: 'happiness as judged from the outside by others. The happiness

of being envied is glamour.'[39] The owners of these interiors were also aware of the role they played in the creation of these glamourous images and positioned themselves in the press as people to be envied, or, as Stephen Gundle notes, as 'magnificent versions of themselves', continuing that glamour:

> is an enticing and seductive vision that is designed to draw the eye of an audience. It consists of a retouched or perfected representation of someone or something whose purpose it is to dazzle and seduce whoever gazes on it.[40]

Glamour is a fundamental part of our understanding of how people made sense of interiors like those analysed in this research.

looking-beyond-seeing: affective reading

An affective reading draws on visual cues and contemporary sources to interpret the sensory and social atmospheres suggested by the photograph. Candlelight would have been key to the experience of this room during a dinner party. As described in contemporary articles and adverts, candlelight was not just there to create visibility but was used to mediate social and emotional connections.[41] What could be seen and how was important to both designer and client and had an important role to play in the overall design of room and table layout. Candlelight mediated the surroundings to the dinner guests and, equally, mediated how the guests saw each other. From the dining room table at Chantrey House candlelight would be used as mediating light to draw all attention to the table arrangement, which operated as both luminous and social focal points, inviting arriving diners toward the table. Although candles are not visible in all photographs of the Chantrey House dining room, its image makes it possible to imagine how candlelight would have structured the visitor's first impression upon entering the room [Fig. 06].

Once seated, these candles would continue to mediate the diners' performance by managing the



Figure 06.
O. Hill, 'Chantrey House, London. Dining room', *The Architectural Review*, LV (January–June 1924), p. 58. Photographer: F. R. Yerbury.

interplay between light and dark, as the ambient lighting in the room would have been dimmed. The dining room table as the main focal point would have been experienced as a frame within the larger frame of the room. As Simon Unwin describes, '[a] table, in its space, frames the life of a meal. It even frames the people sitting around it, though they are outside its rectangle.'[42] The candlelight radiating from the table can be approached as a further frame, framing the faces of the diners without a physical border. Candles are a perfect example of light that generates mediated visibility through their 'colour, angle and intensity', which Katherine Graham refers to as 'a lighting designer's stock-in-trade' that 'can radically transform the appearance of a person, space or object.'[43] The influence stage lighting could have on domestic lighting and decoration was also discussed in the early twentieth century, especially in relation to the psychological and emotional wellbeing of its

occupants. As exemplified by Potvin with a quote from *The Wall-Paper News and Interior Decorator*:

> [s]ince the lighting may enhance or ruin the beauty of a decorative treatment and may make the occupants of a room appear to advantage, or otherwise, it is essential to consider it and much may be learned from the investigation recently conducted in stage lighting.[44]

We can further add that this was equally the hostess's stock-in-trade, helping her to manage the success of her dinner party. The candles on the table would draw the attention of the diners arriving in the room, directing their attention to what would have been the centrepiece of the room.

Contemporary magazines repeatedly emphasised candlelight's capacity to focus attention and cultivate intimacy at the dining table. The hostess's role intersected directly with this reflective staging. Kathleen Kershaw, writing for *The Studio* in 1931, proposed that 'In this age of strong personalities, when every woman is assiduously developing her ego, the dining-table ought to prove to her friends what a very well-balanced mind she has.'[45] The reflective table surface would have enhanced these effects, amplifying the visual presence of both objects and diners through reflection. The use of candles played a significant part in how atmosphere was created on and around the dining room table. Regardless of the style of the room, the hostess who wanted her guests to feel comfortable would have to seek out the best candles and their most effective arrangement. The softening glow of candlelight at the dinner table, according to Len Chaloner writing in *Ideal Home* of 1925, would help to enhance good conversation.[46] Chaloner further highlighted the all-comforting glow of candlelight, reminding his readers of 'The charm of Tinker Bell dancing and twinkling merrily on the walls with the other fairies circling around the little flame restoring a homely familiarity to the chairs and furniture that had loomed huge and strange in the darkness.'[47]

Guests and hosts would not be the only people experiencing the dining room. Households such as these would still rely heavily on domestic service, especially when entertaining. As the light would draw attention to the diners around the table, it would equally exclude those outside of the distinct space created by the candlelight. Servants, for instance, would only penetrate this boundary created through light when called for. Light helped to create a boundary between the public and the private. The experience of the room would therefore not only change according to the time of day but also according to the position within the household.

Even though the majority of Hill's clients still relied heavily on the work of domestic servants for the upkeep of their home environments, many letters between Hill and his clients speak of financial constraints, often leading to alterations in the choice of materials and/or room size.[48] Although expensive materials were used throughout Hill's designs, it can be argued that more practical matters such as cleaning and upkeep also played a role in what was ultimately chosen. In her description of Hill's most well-known design, Gayfere House (1923–1926), for the magazine *Architecture Illustrated*, Lady Mount Temple (Hill's client) highlights practical considerations in relation to the choice of glass, stating that irritating mouldings and dust-collecting cornices can now all 'be swept away without regret.'[49] As Lucy Delap has shown, domestic service remained central to the performance of class identity, sustaining environments of visible refinement through largely invisible work.[50]

If we extend *Looking-beyond-Seeing* beyond what is visible in the photograph, the photograph begins to register not only what is shown but also what is excluded. The absence of servants' bodies in the published image does not signal their absence from the event itself. On the contrary, the smooth functioning of the dinner party depended upon their constant yet carefully managed presence. Their movement (approaching the table, replenishing dishes, and withdrawing again) would

have been meticulously choreographed so that service remained largely invisible within the dining room itself.

Candlelight, as demonstrated, played an important role in structuring this spatial and social choreography. The soft illumination of the table created an intimate visual field centred on the diners, reinforcing the privacy of the room, and equally created a visible separation from the more brightly lit working spaces of the household. As Laura Lutdke has observed in relation to modernist fiction such as *Night and Day* (1919) and *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) by Virginia Woolf, electric light was often associated with functional spaces such as kitchens and service areas, while rooms of sociability were characterised by softer, more atmospheric forms of illumination.[51] In this sense, candlelight in the dining room not only produced a romantic and sociable atmosphere but also signalled the social status of the household. The carefully controlled lighting conditions helped maintain the distinction between the visible world of bourgeois sociability and the largely unseen labour that sustained it.

Within this environment, the intrusion of stronger electric light from adjacent service spaces, such as when a servant entered the room, would have disrupted the carefully calibrated atmosphere of the dinner party. Light therefore operated as a boundary between the private interior and the working spaces of the household, marking the threshold between sociable intimacy and domestic labour.

Through the framework of *Looking-beyond-Seeing*, the photographs of Chantrey House emerge not as a static record but as a mediating surface through which material, social, and sensory relations can be reconstructed. Approaching the photographed interior as a mediated object has positioned the interwar interior photograph as an active site of spatial encounter. Rather than functioning as a deficient surrogate for direct experience, the image operates as a mediating object through which the interwar interior remains accessible. Through *Looking-beyond-Seeing*, Hill's dining room at Chantrey House can be understood as both a photographed space and as an experiential environment reconstructed through mediation.

conclusion

This essay has argued that photographs of interwar interiors should not be dismissed as inadequate surrogates for direct experience, but rather as mediating objects through which spatial, social, and sensory relations can be accessed and reconstructed. By challenging the assumption that mediation constitutes a loss of experiential authenticity, this research has demonstrated that the photographed interior operates as representation and as an active site of encounter.

The framework of *Looking-beyond-Seeing* has provided a methodological means of engaging with interior photographs as mediated spatial propositions. Through material reading, the reflective surfaces, spatial arrangements, and tonal contrasts of Hill's dining room at Chantrey House reveal how material conditions structured perception and communicated social meaning. Through affective reading, the photograph allows the sensory atmospheres of the interior, including the mediating effects of candlelight, the structuring of social interaction, and the invisible labour sustaining the environment, to be interpretatively accessed. In both the material and affective readings, the photograph functions not as a static record but as a mediating surface through which the interior continues to operate beyond its physical existence.

Approaching the photograph as a mediating object also situates Hill's interiors within the broader Production–Consumption–Mediation paradigm. The meanings of these interiors were formed not solely through their physical design, but also through their photographic staging, editorial framing, and circulation within architectural journals and popular magazines. The published photograph became the primary means through which these interiors were encountered, shaping both contemporary

understanding and their subsequent historical interpretation. Mediation was therefore not secondary to the interior but integral to its existence as a cultural and spatial environment.

The case study of Chantrey House demonstrates that staged interior photographs encode material, social, and sensory information that can be accessed through interpretative engagement. Reflective surfaces mediated perception, photographic staging structured social meaning, and the controlled atmospheres of light and sound shaped the experiential conditions of the interior. Through *Looking-beyond-Seeing*, the photograph emerges as a site where spatial experience, social performance, and visual mediation converge.

More broadly, this research suggests that the study of historic interiors can extend beyond the analysis of physical space to include the mediating systems through which interiors were constructed, communicated, and experienced. For many lost or inaccessible interiors, photography does not simply preserve their appearance but constitutes the primary mode through which they continue to exist as spatial and cultural objects. By repositioning mediation as an analytical opportunity rather than a limitation, *Looking-beyond-Seeing* offers a methodological framework applicable to Hill's work and the interwar period, as well as to the wider study of interiors encountered through photographic mediation.

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author biography

Vanessa Vanden Berghe is a senior lecturer and is currently history and theory coordinator on the BA Interior Design at Chelsea College of Art (UAL). She obtained her PhD from the Modern Interior Research Centre, Kingston University, London, where she undertook a critical analysis of the interiors of the architect Oliver Hill.

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ossian's hall of mirrors: nature, artifice, and the environmental imagination

Ro Spankie
University of Westminster
0000-0003-2496-2266

abstract

This essay describes the story of a small, mirrored viewing house, located in an eighteenth-century picturesque landscape known as the Hermitage outside Dunkeld in Perthshire, Scotland. A well-known tourist destination, Ossian's Hall allows visitors to experience the spectacular Black Linn Falls from the comfort of its mirrored interior. The foil backing of the mirrored glass is printed with references to a third-century bard named Ossian, creating the effect that fragments of image and text insert themselves between one's own reflection and that of the furious water beyond. The resulting experience is an act of imagination, slipping between outside and inside, nature and artifice, reality and illusion, blurring the relationship between the interior and interiority.

With interiority, nothing is what it seems. Ossian was a fiction of the romantic imagination, and the viewing hall as experienced today was built in 2007 not 1806, as the little section painted on one of the mirrors suggests. What is maybe less obvious is that the landscape it looks out on has been subject to its own interiority, being simultaneously a 'natural' woodland and an eighteenth-century romantic picturesque landscape, while, for its original owners, the Dukes of Atholl, it was an expression of power and the trees a commercial crop. The landscape is as designed as the little mirrored hall. Why is it so difficult for us to think of nature in this way?

In answering this question, I explore Ossian's Hall and the Hermitage using a combination of historical and archival research, autoethnography and fieldwork. I describe what I find in three layers titled history, self, and nature, that like the reflections in the mirrored interior hover over one another, which I follow with a reflection. This essay is an experiment in applying interior thinking to environmental storytelling.

keywords

interior; interiority; nature; artifice; reflection

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Figure 01.
Interior of Ossian's Hall of Mirrors, May 2022. Photograph by author.

introduction

In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* Amitav Ghosh suggests the reason 'why contemporary culture finds it so hard to deal with climate change [is because] the climate crisis is a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination.'[1] Ghosh explains this statement, writing that 'culture generates desires' — for material goods, behaviours, and expectations, that might be a 'speedy convertible' or a 'certain kind of garden.'[2] He argues however, it is not the thing itself we desire, so much as the image it evokes in our imaginations — images that create longings that are deeply embedded in culture.

> when we see an advertisement that links a picture of a tropical island to the word *paradise*, the longings that are kindled in us have a chain of transmission that stretches back to Daniel Defoe and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. […] The artifacts and commodities that are conjured up by these desires are, in a sense, at once expressions and concealments of the cultural matrix that brought them into being [blinding us to the fact that these desires] are the principal drivers of the carbon economy.[3]

What Ghosh alludes to is that the act of imagination allows us to look forward and imagine the future, but it does so in reference to the past. This is a past that relates not just to our personal memories but also a collective cultural past. In the context of questions concerning imagining, and the interior, this essay explores what insights an interior imagination might reveal about attitudes to nature, both historical and current. Through historical and archival research, field work, and reflections on my own family's past, it reveals how current attitudes towards nature are intertwined with our failure to imagine what the climate crisis might bring.

What is meant by an interior imagination? As an interior educator I have long been interested in the relationship between an interior and interiority, the built form and the effect it creates, the physical and the perceived. These ideas are developed from the position that interiority is an act of imagination requiring the occupant to create an image in their mind that combines the scene in front of them with past experiences, memories, and associations creating a layered image of the space.[4] The major conceptual frame for this is psychoanalysis, particularly Freud's model of the functioning of psyche through the interactions of conscious and the unconscious mind.[5] Resonant with the cultural mechanisms Ghosh describes, an understanding of interiority reveals why interiors are both architectural in their form as well as carriers of wider cultural meaning representing the 'expressions and concealments of the cultural matrix that brought them into being.'[6]

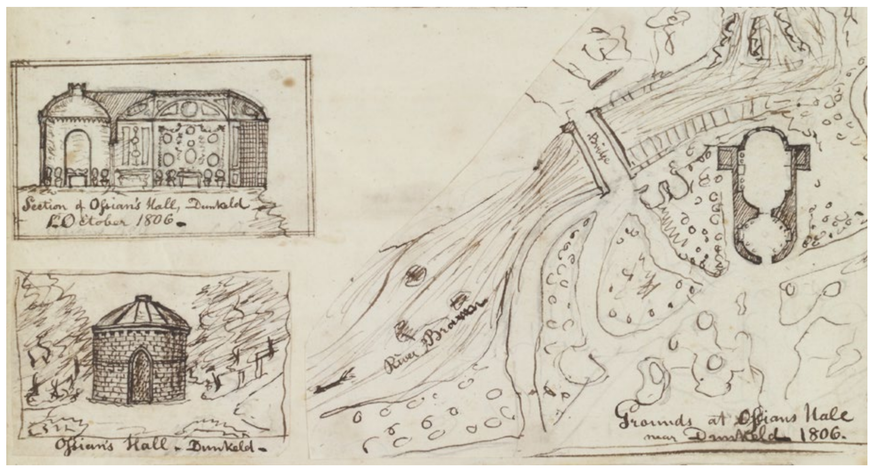
Separated into a series of layered readings entitled history, self, and nature, the essay explores what the relationship between Ossian's Hall and the surrounding landscape expressed when it was created, and as presented today, to shed light on what might have been concealed over time. This is done with reference to Sherry Turkle's understanding of material culture as 'goods-to-think-with', Toni Morrison's practice of 'literary archaeology' to reconstruct forgotten sites, and Roman Krznaric's use of applied history to open our imaginations to long term thinking.[7]

layer 1: history

> 'By the side of a rock on the hill, beneath the aged tree, old Ossian sat on the moss; the last of the race of Fingal. Sightless are his aged eyes; his beard is waving in the wind. Dull through the leafless trees he heard the voice of the north. Sorrow revived in his soul: he began and lamented the dead.'[8]

In 1760, fifteen years after the defeat of the second Jacobite rising by the British Crown and the resulting suppression of Highland culture, a 24-year-old Scottish writer and poet called James Macpherson (1736–1796) set off on travels around the Western Isles.[9] He returned claiming to have discovered some fragments of poetry written by a third-century blind bard named Ossian (or Oisín), which he published as *Fragments of Ancient Poetry, Collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and Translated from the Gaelic or Erse language*.[10] The poems have been described as a form of nature writing, portraying heroic deeds of love and loss and 'the sense of an ancient culture being destroyed' set against dramatic wild landscapes that reflected the emotions of the protagonists.[11] As Professor of Celtic Literature Mark Williams describes, 'Ossian's world is mist-shrouded and crepuscular: the characters are never more than a stone's throw from a gloomy cataract or haunted glen.'[12] Resonant with the eighteenth-century sensibility, 'which thought to dethrone rationality and elevate the passions, with an emphasis on nature as awe-inspiring and productive of deep turbulent feelings', the poems ignited the public imagination in Scotland and beyond.[13] They were read by notable figures of the day including Walter Scott, Thomas Jefferson, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.[14] It is said the 17-year-old Napoleon purchased the Italian translation and 29 years later took a copy with him to exile on St Helena.[15] Today the Ossianic poems are credited with igniting the Gaelic revival and the Romantic movement in general. They also contributed toward 'converting Britons, nay, Europeans, into enthusiastic admirers of nature in her wilder moments.'[16]

Despite their immense popularity, many — including the preeminent man of English letters Samuel Johnson — were sceptical about the authorship, believing Ossian to be a creation of Macpherson's imagination.[17] The view that is generally accepted today is that the poems are an example of the 'found manuscript trope', that is a work of literature that claims to come from an original source, which is in fact fictional.[18] Looking back from the twenty-first century, Macpherson is not so unusual. If one reads the eighteenth-



a



b



c

Figure 02.
Contemporary descriptions of Ossian's Hall. (a) Sketch plan, section, and elevation drawn by John Sime in 1806, with permission from Historic Environment Scotland Collections. (b) Ossian's Hall by John Dugmore (1793–1871), with permission from the Government Art Collection. (c) Original furniture from Ossian's Hall displayed at Blair Castle, Perthshire, May 2022. Photograph by author.

century travel writers and novelists one will notice how the two genres were curiously intertwined, as is the relationship between reality and imagination, fact and fiction. Consider that Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) or Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) are both fictions presented as memoirs that, like Macpherson's poems, captured the public imagination and became ingrained in culture.

Ossian was as influential in the visual arts as literature and one of the many physical manifestations of 'Ossian-mania' was Ossian's Hall commissioned in 1783 by John Murray, the 4th Duke of Atholl (1755–1830). The Dukes of Atholl were chiefs of the Scottish Clan Murray, who, despite divided family loyalties during the Jacobite rising in 1745, retained their substantial land holdings in the 'post 45' reorganisations which replaced the collective ownership of clan lands with a so-called 'modern' system of property or single private ownership.[19]

Ossian's Hall was designed by the painter and architect George Steuart (c. 1730–1806), his brief to re-design a small structure on the Atholls' estate as a homage to the Celtic warrior-poet. The original structure, built in 1758, was a simple single chambered 'view house' known as the Hermitage (which had lent its name to the area), situated over the dramatic Black Linn Falls and suited to solitary contemplation. In contrast, Steuart's design was a fashionable two chambered panorama-style interior, furnished for socialising, the walls lined with paintings depicting scenes from the Ossianic poems and mirrors reflecting the falls [Fig. 02]. Steuart describes the design in detail in a letter sent to his patron on 28 June 1783.

> The paintings are framed to fit the sides of the room between the return glass Pilasters and a space left in the centre panels to screw the convex glasses to. The light is reversed on the Painting to suit the light from one end. The circular end at the door is formed by three panels of glass on each side of the door.[20]

The duke's guests would arrive by carriage and be served refreshments while appreciating the picturesque landscape in front of them so reminiscent of those described in the poems. Ossian's Hall of Mirrors offered an elite and affected view that reflected the duke's cultural taste and wealth as much as Macpherson's poems or the falls.

Ossian's Hall, and its fantastic mirrored interior, dedicated to the imagined words of a semi-mythical third-century poet, soon became one of the most visited sites of the Romantic Movement in Scotland, recommended by early travel writers such as advocate of the picturesque William Gilpin in 1776, and the poets William and Dorothy Wordsworth in 1803.[21] It was visited by celebrities of the time including Queen Victoria and the artist J. M. W. Turner.[22]

Dorothy Wordsworth described her visit in her travel memoir:

> The waterfall, which we came to see, warned us by a loud roaring that we might expect it; we first, however, conducted into a small compartment, where the gardener desired us to look at a painting of the figure of Ossian, which, while he was telling us the story of the young artist who performed the work, disappeared, parting in the middle, flying asunder as if by the touch of magic, and lo! we are at the entrance of a splendid room, which was almost dizzy and alive with waterfalls, that tumbled in all directions — the great cascade, which was opposite to the window that faced us, being reflected in innumerable mirrors upon the ceiling and against the walls.[23]

layer 2: self



Figure 03.
Letter dated 10 October 1772.

The second layer begins in 2015, following the death of my parents, when I inherited a carrier bag of 'family papers' from a great aunt including fifteen letters dating from 1768–1774 sent by a John Warden (1742–1814) in the Virginia Colony in America, back home to his friend Thomas Spankie (1743–1783) in Scotland.

In her book *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With*, Professor Sherry Turkle, a psychologist at MIT, suggests that objects act as emotional and intellectual companions that anchor memory, sustain relationships, and provoke new ideas.[24] She writes, 'We find it familiar to consider objects as useful or aesthetic, as necessities or vain indulgences. We are on less familiar ground when we consider objects as companions to our emotional lives or as provocations to thought.'[25] Turkle continues with reference to the structural anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, who described bricolage as a way of combining and re-combining a closed set of materials to come up with new ideas.[26] She suggests objects work in a similar way, that material things are goods-to-think-with, because they represent many things to us.[27]

The letters are both objects and texts [Fig. 03]. Written in the days before postage stamps, the paper is folded in such a manner to create an envelope with the address and instructions to the captain of the ship that will carry them. They are 250 years old. I am drawn to their fragile beauty as objects — the worn velvety texture of the paper that has been read and re-read and carefully passed down the generations. The tiny but legible handwriting gives a personal account of the build-up to the American Revolution as well as detail of everyday life. The last letter is sent in November 1774, a few months before military engagements broke out. Warden's immigrant narrative echoes Sarah Pearsall's argument that the American Revolution was the result of a complex global context rather than an isolated event.[28]

An observant reader might guess by the name that the recipient Thomas Spankie is my direct ancestor. Ever since I was given the letters, they have become my evocative objects, offering me clues to my own identity, decentring my understanding of the past, revealing how quickly things get forgotten as the prevailing narrative reconstructs the past to fit the present — history is a bricolage.

Warden had met Spankie while studying theology at St Andrews University. A man without prospects, due to his father being imprisoned for being a Jacobite, in 1768 he set sail for Virginia to become an indentured tutor and later to train as a lawyer. Through the letters I have got to know Warden — thoughtful, well read, and a fluent writer; he is also lonely and often unwell.[29] As the recipient, Spankie remains frustratingly silent. The St Andrews Biographical Register records him as being Minister in the Parish of Falkland (1770–1783); however, correspondence in the Blair Atholl archive revealed that as well as being a Minister, he acted as a 'factor' or property manager to John Murray, the 4th Duke of Atholl. Letters from Spankie to the duke describe digging test pits for coal 'thirty fathoms deep' (180 feet) and planting large numbers of trees.[30] These are not tasks one expects of an educated theologian and man of God and suggest his history is more complex than it first appears.

In studying interiors, I have always been interested in how history is stored in places and things, an embodied non-verbal history that combines

and complements more traditional histories as found in libraries and archives. In an essay titled 'The Site of Memory' the American novelist Toni Morrison explores the difference between memoir and fiction.[31] Her interest is the slave narratives or memoirs from the eighteenth century, in which she notices that in an attempt to encourage a broad readership the authors drop 'a veil over proceedings too horrible to relate', the result being that 'there was no mention of their interior life.'[32] As a writer of fiction drawing on these narratives for her novels she reflects 'but memories and recollections won't give me total access to the unwritten interior life of these people. Only the act of imagination can help me.'[33] In her attempt to imagine what these writers' lives were like she describes her research strategy.

> It's a kind of literary archaeology: on the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world these remains imply. What makes it fiction is the nature of the imaginative act: my reliance on the image – on the remains – in addition to recollection, to yield up a kind of truth.[34]

She notes that 'the act of imagination is bound up with memory', by which she is referring to her own memories, which she acknowledges as a source of reconstruction.[35] Her methods resonate with my experience of my own family's history. Warden and Spankie were of no historical significance. Their stories are long forgotten. In 2015, when I was given my inheritance, the only tangible evidence I had for the two men's existence was the letters themselves and the names of places and spaces they referred to. However, reading Warden's memories of their time together at St Andrews, I cannot help but project family traits onto Spankie.

The more I researched into the contents of the letters, the more I realise how much of the eighteenth century is still with us if we care to recognise it, both in physical artifacts and in the ideas that underpin our so called 'modern' culture. The beginning of the Scottish Enlightenment was a time that saw a marked paradigm shift from religion and the feudal clan system into education, reason, and industrialisation, which went hand in hand with a shift from an allegiance to a collective endeavour to the emergence of the individual.

It is also the time where the man/nature divide becomes more pronounced. For me it is significant the letters were written in the 1760s, the start of the Industrial Revolution, a date that is commonly identified with the origins of the current climate crisis but also when Macpherson introduces the romantic figure of Ossian. I can imagine these seemingly contrary ideas of the rational vs the romantic by picturing my ancestor, an educated and religious man, digging for coal, the energy-dense material that will drive industrialisation, versus the duke sitting in his viewing hall contemplating a layered image of himself, his face reflected alongside fashionable cultural references and the landscape that he owned. Like the romantic tourists, the duke's view of nature was as a backdrop to project onto rather than something to be part of. The roots of our complex and contrary relationship with nature today similarly reflect the 'expressions and concealments of the cultural matrix that brought them into being.'[36]

layer 3: nature

> Apparently, in its heyday, a couple of hundred years ago, the walls were lined with mirrors to reflect the falls, so the Duke of Atholl and his guests could enjoy the sublime river sound and the peat-tinged, spumy water cascading all about them. A little Romantic eco-art installation.[37]

W. G. Hoskins argues in *The Making of the English Landscape* that landscapes are the richest record we have of the past, and function as a living archive.[38] In contrast, a recent Government briefing revealed that as a nation, in the UK, we spend 80 to 90 per cent



a b c

Figure 04.
The Hermitage, May 2022. Photographs by author.

of our lives indoors, meaning one could reasonably suggest we are ill equipped to understand this incredible natural archive in the way our ancestors might have.[39] The result is a phenomenon that Jared Diamond describes as 'landscape amnesia' or the tendency to forget what kind of natural assets existed even in the recent past.[40] For me, landscape amnesia combined with an inability to 'read' the natural world is one of the reasons that has resulted in the crisis of the imagination referred to by Ghosh.

I decided to visit Ossian's Hall. Working in a manner similar to Toni Morrison's literary archaeology, combining literary work with field work was particularly helpful when writing about nature. Today the Hermitage is an area of 33 acres of conifer and deciduous woodlands maintained by the National Trust for Scotland. Home to some of the tallest trees in Britain it is listed as 'outstanding' for 'Artistic', 'Historical', 'Horticultural', and 'Architectural' interest by Historic Environment Scotland.[41] Until one visits the site it is easy to forget Ossian's Hall is designed to be experienced as one of a series of features in a picturesque landscape.

diary entry of a visit 14 May 2022

We pull off the A9, park the car and choose to follow the path that runs up alongside the River Braan. It is May and the forest feels dark, damp, and lush. The path is covered in pine needles from the huge Douglas firs that tower above us, their ancient, gnarled roots pushing between the valley's rocky floor, providing natural steps up. All the time as we walk, we are accompanied by the sound and smell of the water. The word Braan is of Pictish origin, meaning to 'bellow, bray, roar' and as the Braan tumbles down the gorge it lives up to its name.[42] It's a landscape that feels both ancient and alive and I am excited to be walking in my ancestor's footsteps [Fig. 04].

The first sign that we are getting near to our destination is a single-arch stone bridge, a bridge so picturesque that it seems more like a film set. A fallen tree stump below reminds one of how vulnerable these giant trees are to the recent deadly storms that some see as the planet warning that not all is as it should be. Once one of the tallest trees in Britain, the root plate is all that is left after this giant came down in January 2017. It was over 61 metres high when it fell, crashing through its own information board, luckily just short of the stone bridge.

Above the bridge, perched on a ledge, suspended over the falls, we see Ossian's Hall [Fig. 05]. Just as Dorothy Wordsworth had described two hundred years before, one enters through a circular antechamber to be faced by a mirror with an illustration of a man's face on it. The mirror is actually



a b c

Figure 05.
Ossian's Hall as seen May 2022. Photographs by author.

a door that slides into a slot in the wall, allowing access to a larger oval chamber, open at the far end, giving the most spectacular view onto the Black Linn Falls. The walls are painted ochre red and lined with mirrors that reflect the trees and waters beyond, allowing the visitor to see themselves and the falls at the same time. The mirrors are printed with painted figures and quotes from the Ossianic poems — creating the effect that fragments of image and text insert themselves between one's own image and the furious water beyond. The curved form of the room accentuates the sound and smell of the falling water. The mirrored hall is a textbook example of the power of interior design to transform a seemingly simple architectural structure with plaster, paint, and mirrors, the artifice allowing the experience to slip between inside and outside, reality and illusion, blurring the relationship between the interior and interiority, challenging one's perception of the space.



Figure 06.
Dr Prosody's 'Disaster in Ossian's Hall' parodying the three giants of Scottish tour writing, Samuel Johnson, Thomas Pennant, and William Gilpin from *The Tour of Doctor Prosody* (1821).

The door is already open when we arrive and most of the visitors ignore the antechamber and the mirrors and head straight for the viewing platform where, in that curious twenty-first-century fashion, they turn their back on the view to take a selfie. Interestingly, the twenty-first-century obsession of treating nature as a backdrop to one's own image echoes the purpose of this mirrored pavilion from the eighteenth century. The difference today is that everyone's doing it, not just the cultured few. The experience is a little disappointing and I cannot help but wonder at the irony of all this narcissistic gazing dedicated to a poet who was blind.

As the Dukes of Atholl grew in power, so did social unrest. The effete romantic tourists of Ossian's Hall were parodied in publications such as *The Tour of Doctor Prosody* [Fig. 06].[43] In 1821, it was recorded that a tourist guide who hadn't been paid deliberately broke open the door, allowing cattle to wander into the viewing hall, damaging the interiors.[44] Then more spectacularly in 1869, in response to an unpopular tax, Ossian's Hall was blown up with gunpowder by locals.[45] In the explosion, the roof was torn off and the mirrors shattered. By the twentieth century Ossian's Hall stood derelict and in 1943 the Duchess of Atholl gave 33 acres of the Hermitage including the ruined viewing hall to the National Trust for Scotland.[46] Its current mirrored interior is a reconstruction by the National Trust for Scotland that re-opened in 2007, which perhaps explains my disappointment and reveals the pitfalls of literary archaeology as well as an over reliance on eighteenth-century guidebooks.



a b

Figure 07.
(a) *Falls on the River Braan*, Charles Steuart, 1765, oil on canvas, from the collection at Blair Castle, Perthshire.
(b) The Black Linn Falls as seen May 2022. Photograph by author.

During a visit to Blair Castle, home to the Atholl family for over seven centuries, I notice a painting of the *Falls on the River Braan* from 1765, eighteen years before Steuart's mirrored hall was built. It is noticeable how different the landscape looks compared to today, in particular the lack of trees [Fig. 07]. The Hermitage at Dunkeld had once been part of the Great Birnam Wood made famous by William Shakespeare's *Tragedy of Macbeth*, first performed in 1606.[47] By the 1760s this ancient native woodland had largely been cut down for lumber. However, one of the results of the single private ownership created in the 'post 45 reorganisation' was a rapid increase in commercial plantations transforming the once open glen back to forest. The scale of the Atholls' planting was astonishing, responsible for planting 21 million trees on 15,000 acres of ground over a period of a 100 years, the majority of which were Dunkeld Larch.[48] In 1782 Thomas Spankie wrote to the Duke that he was also planting, 'Planes, Oaks, Beeches, Rowan, Elm and Ash.'[49] The 4th Duke is recorded as saying that planting ought to be carried on for beauty, effect, and profit, a very modern sentiment.[50] I allow myself to imagine my ancestor, the Reverend, walking up the open glen with his congregation to plant trees. Perhaps some of the very trees I walked past that morning?

the challenges of thinking long term in a short-term world

The Dukes of Atholl or Clan Murray can trace their lineage back to the twelfth century, allowing for long-term thinking. Part of the grand plan of the 4th Duke was to replant the area with larches and conifers that when mature could be sold to the Royal Navy and bring in a good return for his descendants.[51] This long-term plan failed, as by the time the trees had matured two hundred years later, the Navy was building steel-hull ships. Unintentionally, however, the so-called 'Planter Duke' left a different legacy. Today, in Scotland, ancient woodland is defined as land that is currently wooded and has been continually wooded since at least 1750.[52] The Hermitage, which is already exhibiting considerable natural regeneration, is about to come under this category.

The artifice has become natural, but there are few who remember such a time span. Part of the disconnect is because what is considered natural depends on what time span you are working in. The danger of the mirrored reflection and the selfie is that one freezes a living backdrop to a moment in time and assumes it always looked like this. Consider the different life spans of the various protagonists of this essay: the landscape: millennia, the trees: an Oak a thousand years, a Douglas Fir 750 years, a Larch 250 years, or a family line such as my own (Thomas Spankie is my fifth great grandfather and there are 220 years between our birthdates) compared to an individual life span of potentially eighty years.

Toni Morrison suggested the act of imagination is bound up with memory. Yet, it is also bound up with time. The longer the timespan the more difficult it is to rely on memory and the greater the act of imagination required. As Morrison writes, 'on the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world these remains imply.'[53] The challenge is to remember (or even understand) what is fact and what is imagination as one constructs a narrative around the fragments that remain. Just because an object, a tree, or a building exists in the present, it doesn't mean it existed in the past in the same

context. As L. P. Hartley famously wrote, 'The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.'[54] The important thing is that we try.

the reflection

I want to finish where I began. In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh points out:

> Recognition is famously a passage from ignorance to knowledge. To recognise, then, is not the same as an initial introduction. Nor does recognition require an exchange of words: more often than not we recognise mutely. [...] The most important element of the word *recognition* thus lies in its first syllable, which harks back to something prior, an already existing awareness that makes possible the passage from ignorance to knowledge: a moment of recognition occurs when a prior awareness flashes before us, effecting an instant change in our understanding of that which is beheld. [...] The knowledge that results from recognition, then, is not of the same kind as the discovery of something new: it arises rather from a renewed reckoning with a potentiality that lies within oneself.[55]

The etymon of the word reflect is 'reflectere', to turn back, suggesting the function of reflection is also to look back, behind you, but also in time. Recognition and reflection resonate with the idea that interiority is an act of imagination requiring the occupant to create an image in their mind that combines the scene in front of them with past experiences, memories, and associations, thereby creating a layered image of a space.

The research for this essay used historical and archival material, as well as my own family history to direct field work and create what Toni Morrison describes as a 'kind of literary archaeology' of the little mirrored hall and Thomas Spankie's life.[56] In each of the three layers, history, self, and nature, there is nothing new. Instead, as Turkle suggested, I have combined and re-combined an existing set of materials as provocations to thought.[57] This was not done to provide a historical description of an interior. Instead, it aimed to understand what lies behind contemporary attitudes to nature and give insight into the cultural crisis that Ghosh suggests is preventing us imagining and acting on the climate crisis. As Krznaric writes, the 'purpose of the past is not to enable us to predict the future [...] but rather to open up our imaginations.'[58]

John Warden's story of immigration and colonialism place him in a culture that Ghosh describes as 'intimately linked with the wider histories of imperialism and capitalism that have shaped the world.'[59] In contrast, Thomas Spankie's life aligns more closely with the romantic sensibility of shaping nature to a culturally pre-conceived and imagined world view. These are two seemingly different positions that, like the mirrors that line the interior of Ossian's Hall, reflect not just nature but also an eighteenth-century idea about nature, where nature and artifice are seen as opposites. The word 'natural', meaning derived from nature, is the opposite of the word 'artificial', meaning made or produced by human beings.

I want to suggest such binaries may no longer be useful. Comparing the contents of my ancestor's letters to the living archive reveals a more complex picture, as both stories involve shaping or designing the so-called natural world. Today the landscape of the Hermitage presents as an ancient woodland. In 1783 visitors looked out on an eighteenth-century romantic picturesque landscape embodying the wild nature of the Romantic imagination. Meanwhile, for the Dukes of Atholl, it was an expression of power and the trees a commercial crop. Looked at over 250 years, the landscape of the Hermitage is as much a part of Ghosh's cultural expressions and concealments as Steuart's mirrored interior and could be said to be just as susceptible to artifice. Living in the geological age of the Anthropocene, this shouldn't come as a surprise. But in the

twenty-first century, an increasing disconnection from the natural world, combined with an inability to imagine non-human timespans, has resulted in what Diamond describes as 'landscape amnesia.'[60] This amnesia is the reason why we struggle to comprehend nature as human-made and an integral part of culture, allowing us to stop treating nature as a backdrop and imagine ourselves as part of it.

We can perhaps take a clue from these eighteenth-century figures described in the text and their ability to imagine the past; the nostalgic wild landscapes described in Macpherson's nature writing and the future; the Atholls' ambitious re-foresting project.[61] Or the last words of John Warden, who reportedly wrote in his will:

> I hope no tombstone will be raised over me, because it will merely hinder something from growing on the spot. If all men had tombstones erected over their graves, the earth, in a few centuries, would be one entire pavement.[62]

It is an exemplary act of imagination and a powerful response to Ghosh's provocation.

postscript — further reflections on the natural

'Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be until
Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill
Shall come against him.'
Macbeth, Act IV, Scene I

After visiting the Hermitage we walk down to the River Tay to visit the 'Birnam Oak.' It is the last survivor of the medieval forest known as the Great Birnam Wood. Many believe that Shakespeare got inspiration for the 'Scottish Play' during a visit to Perth, Birnam, and Aberdeen in 1599, as one of a troupe of players known as the Lord Chamberlain's Men sent by Elizabeth I of England at the request of King James VI of Scotland.[63] This ancient Sessile Oak is estimated to be 600 years old, so would have been mature in 1599 when Shakespeare and his troupe may have performed in Dunkeld.

In *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, Macbeth, who has gained the throne through murder, is told by three witches that he shall never be vanquished until Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane Hill, the site of his castle. Macbeth takes the witches' prophecy literally and believes himself to be invincible, because, he reasons, trees don't move. But as every school child knows, under Malcolm's orders, his army cut branches to camouflage themselves as they advance on Dunsinane and, to Macbeth's horror, the unthinkable, the unnatural happens, the trees seem to 'unfix their earth-bound roots' and he is overcome.[64] For Shakespeare and his audiences, however, the one who is unnatural is Macbeth, on account of his immoral behaviour. Nature and morality were intertwined in the Elizabethan mind.

Considered today, Shakespeare's conceit has an eerie and predictive quality to it, as the trees are on the move again, this time due to global warming. Writer and environmental activist Ben Rawlence has mapped out the boreal forest on the move, turning white arctic green.[65] He writes that a forest is not a static thing, the boreal forest (which consists of similar trees to the Hermitage, Scots Pine, Birch, Larch, Spruce, Poplar, and Ash) has been on the move for millennia, moving up and down with each ice age; climate change is their core business. It has taken 250 years for the Hermitage to become a 'natural' woodland. Today the boreal forest is currently moving towards the pole, moving at such a pace that maps can't keep up. We should take heed of the witches' and/or the scientists' warnings.

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author biography

Dr Ro Spankie is a Principal Lecturer in Interior Architecture at the University of Westminster and Director of the Architecture+Cities Climate Action Taskforce. Interested in the relationship between physical environments, culture, and story-telling, she combines fact and fiction to re-imagine forgotten pasts and anticipate future needs. Recent papers include 'From Shadow Space to Dark Skies – a Journey From Inner Space to Outer Space', *Folk, Knowledge, Place*, 2.2 (2025).

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image as host

Gina Olsson
University of Edinburgh
0000-0002-7287-2858

The image as a marked canvas plays host to the designer's thoughts and ideas, as an opportunity to speculate on meaning and intent within the image itself and the embodied action of the interior it conveys. Where the photograph of an existing interior is utilised as the starting point for a design journey, it captures a presented situation, as we now find it, or as it once was, to be reread and reused, inviting its audience, the designer, and the viewer to simultaneously inhabit both space and image. As a venue for one's gaze, the host image acts as a conduit from site and studio, past and present, a memory cast in print. Images of rediscovered interiors expose forgotten narratives, providing insight into previous ideas, activities, and behaviours. Each photograph journeys through time, inviting a second audience to enter the space, playing host to new visitors who may project their own interpretation and experience within, 'breaching the boundary between world and self'.[1]

When the interior is entirely lost, the image becomes real, challenging our perception of truth and tangibility. Which is more fixed — the image as a controlled snapshot in time or the interior as a physical reality of place? Which is more ephemeral, which is shifting, what is permanent? As a premade canvas for reuse, the host is a catalyst, contextual yet provocative. Despite the reality contained upon its flattened interior, the designer sees at once both boundaries and opportunities to be remodelled, overwritten, reworked, reimagined.

As opposed to the detachment in imagery created as so-called 'paper architecture', the act of imaging over an image correlates to building on the built, directly engaging with both the resonance of place, and our place within it. In this 'medium of exchange' where the process of making a 'drawing' or image will directly impact the conception of a tangible space itself, we are able to mediate between the remote activity of designing and physical place, between real and imaginary.[2] In this process, where the host image is positioned as the base layer, it immediately alleviates both the starkness of the blank sheet of paper and the physical detachment from site; a design dialogue commences as a back and forth between the existing and the imagined, the found, uncovered, and the designer's intent.

In this 'territory of discovery' each photograph acts as a canvas to be reread through a new lens, acting beyond the original intention.[3] In denial of the stance that 'the drawing as object, disappears at the moment of construction', the marked canvas becomes a venue for reuse, as a place that exists as both building and image simultaneously.[4] As the image is changed it goes through its own change of use, behaving as the interior it was once instructed to serve. Laden with context, narrative, and atmosphere, superimposed interventions take on parasitic characteristics, clashing and colliding, as provocateurs for creative stimuli.

cite as:
Gina Olsson, 'Image As Host', *Idea Journal*, 23.2 (2026), pp. 103–115, doi.org/10.37113/ij.v23i2.663.

Each of the five images that follow invite us to step inside their respective interiors, as we revisit the journey from origin to photograph and, in some cases, beyond. The audience view in tandem an image that behaves like an interior, and an interior that behaves like an image. Articulated through the author abstracts, we are presented with a variety of tactics that utilise images as iterative tools questioning representation as a medium to record, construct, fantasise, and rebuild.

At their most basic these images are simply a photograph of an interior, which records and conveys how it existed at that precise moment in time through the eyes of the photographer. Used as an interrogative tool across research, teaching, and design practice, these photographs when presented in their original state operate as a window to the past, unchanged and frozen in time. We understand how this archival photography can strip back the layers of previous remodelling to allow us to contemplate original décor and form. And, as the images are overlaid and reworked, the collaged host image becomes a palimpsest, where the preserved and the altered coexist as a layered structure, revealing remnants to form the foundations of a new beginning.

As a site for reuse, the images are seen as an 'invitation to speculate' — with layers exposed and 'sketched' over as a generator of ideas.[5] Reconfigured to create new strata of speculative representation, different approaches are communicated to convey multiple techniques such as montage, digital collage, and photographic imagery combined with LiDAR scans that at once excavate and dissect, reinterpret and reinhabit. They blend digital and analogue techniques, as creative approaches, teaching tools, and mechanisms for reflection.

Adolf Loos was quoted as saying photographs of interiors were worthless, in that a two-dimensional image could not capture a complex spatial reality or idea, arguing that one could not experience haptic material qualities or movement through the spaces in a two-dimensional flattened image.[6] In our post-digital age, that notion now seems outdated, and the hyperreal imagery we present here reflects upon the ability of the image to transport the viewer into and beyond a singular fixed static gaze, communicating movement, atmosphere, expression, and a sense of time; as Belinda Mitchell suggests in her following abstract, allowing the image to 'operate as an affective site of encounter.'

The images presented here invite the reader to enter these three-dimensional places to revisit the past and journey into the future within the boundaries of their own imagination.

exposing the canon: photography as tool to forensically deconstruct the interiors of modernist icons and critique their technological context

R. Michael Spooner

With increasing awareness of the provenance of materials and consequences of design decisions, it is incumbent on both students and educators that the canon of twentieth-century architecture is situated within not only a cultural context, but also a technical one, appreciating where ideologies and industrial ideals meet realties of site, procurement, and performance.

The Villa Müller (1928–30) is among the most famous Modernist interiors, and the last by Adolf Loos, built some twenty years after his polemical lecture *Ornament and Crime*. The house features materially and personally expressive interiors, playing an outsized role in the discourse of architectural history. Beatriz Colomina focuses on the Villa Müller in her exploration of domestic space, and specifically on its representation through photography (1992, 1994).[7]

Loos stated that 'So photography says nothing, you see', and yet he carefully curated documentation of the house with the photographer Martin Gerlach in 1930, the gaze meticulously controlled.[8] The Müller interior survived much because of its archival image when the actual building was occupied, deteriorating, inaccessible.

Photography played a critical role in the analysis of the interior of Villa Müller, from the Raumplan and use of parallax to privacy and gendered spaces. More recent reconstruction efforts (1997–2000) have finally brought the house into public access, involving forensic preservation, recreated in part using historic photos and underscoring the enduring legacy of the image record.

The argument is made that to understand Loos and other canonical figures, including troublesome knowledge of the creator and the social context, contemporaneous site photos should be employed to enable a deeper understanding of the process and constraints, avoiding the disconnect of design from the act of building. In addition to the inevitable tension between objective documentation and subjective interpretation, as the photo attests there are also contradictions between the ideals and realities of fabrication, production, and restoration.



Figure 01.
Image by R. Michael Spooner, incorporating photograph, used with permission from Martin Polák (copyright 2007).

without faith, verily is there no honesty

Corryn Kosik

The Arbour Room is thought to have been the bedchamber of Regent Arran while in residence at Kinneil House in Bo'ness, Scotland. The murals visible in this room encompass Arran's commissioned Biblical and botanical decoration from the mid-1500s and later murals from the early seventeenth century.

The demolition of Kinneil House began in the 1930s — dismantling a sixteenth-century building that once served as a primary residence of James Hamilton, 2nd Earl of Arran and Regent of Scotland for Mary, Queen of Scots. The discovery of murals halted the demolition, though the entire interior of the tower house was already removed, leaving a hollow shell.

The current state of Kinneil reveals snippets of material evidence linking the building to its sixteenth-century past, further complicated by multiple later renovations completed in both the tower and lodging blocks, leaving little trace of its original form. Photography is integral to the survival of the lost interior of Kinneil, as it affords a brief look into previous architectural schemes and decoration now lost to time.

This research intends to make use of the photography taken of Kinneil's interior spaces pre-demolition and the murals post-conservation to re-create the building's appearance during the life of Regent Arran. Alongside architectural plans and inventories, these photographs have become building blocks for reconstructing the layout of Kinneil. The murals found on the first-floor walls of Arran's apartments allow for interpretation as to how the sixteenth-century rooms may have once appeared and how they functioned.

Photographs of botanical murals that once decorated Lady Arran's apartments allow glimpses into rooms that have since been whitewashed and repurposed, leaving only a fireplace to indicate how the space may once have been used. These photographs are the last vestiges of a lost interior that will contribute to a digital re-creation of Kinneil House, not only shedding light on the layout of the building, but also providing insight into court life, palace planning, and room usage in early modern Scotland.



Figure 02.
Image by Corryn Kosik.

pittsburgh: the urban room

Patrizio M. Martinelli

Pittsburgh: The Urban Room is part of a series exploring iconic American interiors, created after a research trip through Chicago, Denver, and Pittsburgh. The montage reimagines Pittsburgh's Union Station (1898–1904) by Daniel Burnham as a reincarnation of the Pantheon. Personal visual memories of the iconic monument interact with the station's dome; a map of Rome, drawn as an imaginary circular interior, overlays the semi-sphere, while figures gather beneath in a shared celebration, a tribute to Gehl's *Life Between Buildings*.[9]

This series draws from Cubist paintings, which dissect space and time, as well as the theories of Zevi, Rasmussen, and Pallasmaa.[10] Through these lenses, I visually explored space using Hockney's 'joiner' photo-collage technique, moving beyond one-point perspective of conventional photography to evoke, with multiple shots, movement in space and time.[11] The essence of the spaces is then extracted — their character, themes, precedents, and experiential qualities — through the dissection and re-composition of the photographs with additional cultural and artistic layers, blending collective and personal experiences and memories.

This montage also aims to return the interior to a conceptual realm, to the idea, before realisation, through transformation, transposition, and creative evocation. Assembled images create a 'short circuit' of knowledge, engaging both creator and viewer in an imaginative dialogue, since 'the principle of montage had always been linked to the theme of activating the public.'[12]

Expanding from visual perception to design, the author employs what they call 'retroactive' montages, adapting Rem Koolhaas' term from *Delirious New York* to reimagine interiors.[13] Unlike retrospective analysis, which looks back, contemplating and interpreting, the retroactive approach is dynamic and fertile, generating new interpretations, ideas, designs.

This method also serves as a pedagogical tool, developed and practised within live teaching assignments and featured in the 2021 Interior Design Educators Council Innovative Teaching Ideas collection.

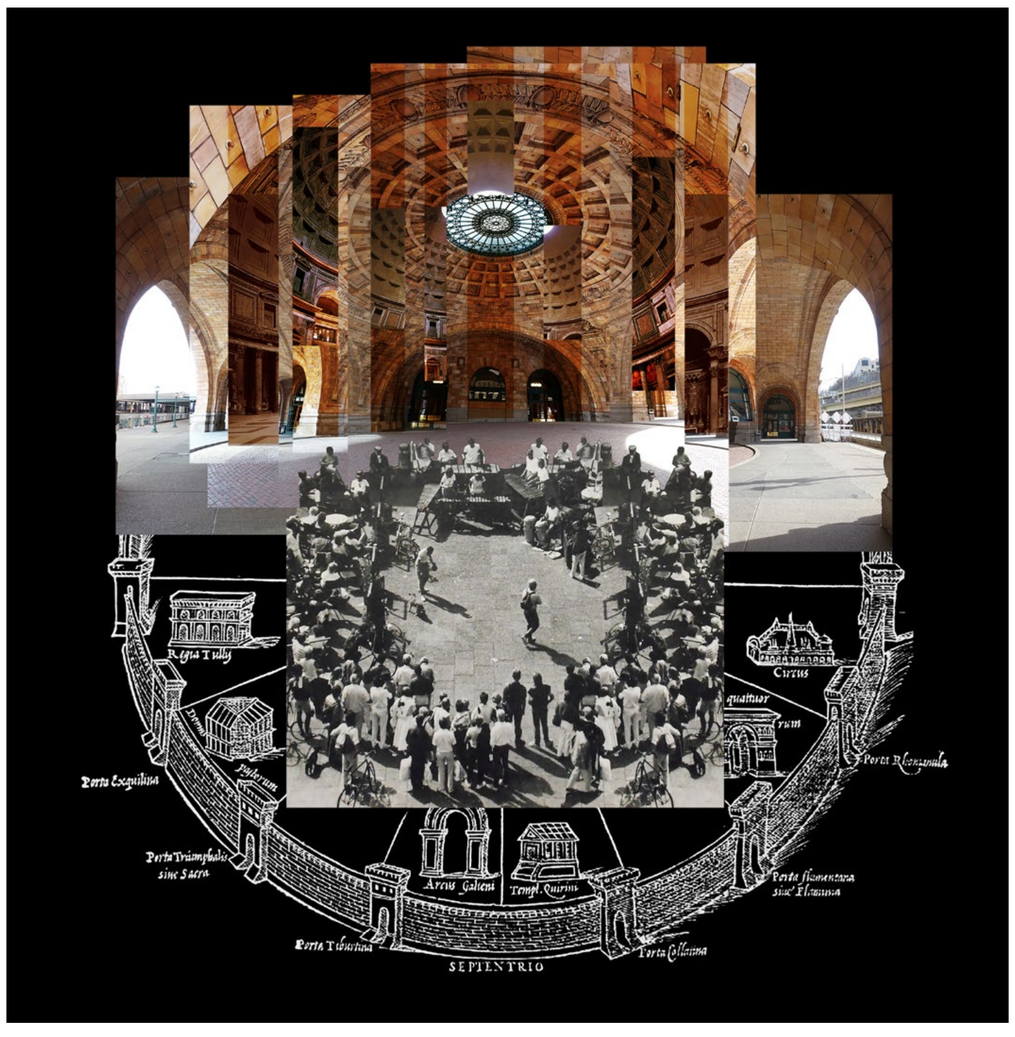

Figure 03.
Image by Patrizio M. Martinelli

unearthing lost interior realms

Inez Low



Figure 04.
Photograph of public space in the rates department of Norwich City Hall, taken in the 1930s. Architectural Press Archives / RIBA Collections.

‘Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy.’[14]

Unearthing lost interior realms as a design research tool allows the designer to step through various interior spaces in time without physical movement, and to deduct and speculate a spatial understanding of how interiors are represented in photography. These photographs are time markers that tell a story of a moment in time, an interior space frozen in time. Exhuming colours, materiality, and texture from a non-existent interior space allows designers to learn about a historical representation of a lost era and, thus, in a project, allow it to be woven back into a contemporary design narrative.

What can we see in these spaces?

What is it trying to show us?

What can we learn from them?

From the refurbishment of Norwich City Hall, this image takes on a lead role. The design process started with researching the design strategy of the original interior, exhuming colours, materiality, and texture from a non-existent interior space. The photograph shows the lost interior of the original Rates Hall in the building [Fig. 04]. As time moves on, the interior as shown has gone through many iterations and no longer carries its modernist lines and shape.

The design team time travelled to many points in history (via the humble photograph) to understand the development of the interior: what has been stripped out, what has been retained, what colours were used, what are the materials like? As it stands, the current Rates Hall has been divided into many small offices, stripped out of its original lines and modernist look. In the refurbishment proposal, we aim to honour the former glory of the space, restoring its sharper qualities and establishing a new interior language that speaks to the present.

between the real and imagined: the great hall, wymering manor, 2024

Belinda Mitchell

The photographic image, *Between the real and imagined: The Great Hall, Wymering Manor, 2024*, diffracts the architectural interior through fine art practice, offering a reimagining of how interiors are conceived and produced.[15]

Emerging from research situated in feminist philosophy, corporeal feminism (Grosz), material semiotics (Haraway), and new materialism (Barad), the work integrates embodied and digital drawing practices to trace multiple ways of seeing, being *with*, and moving through a site.[16] Improvisational movement underpins the gathering of subjective, sensory, and aesthetic experiences, while innovative drawing methods — particularly the reappropriation of digital surveying tools — disrupt gendered conventions of architectural representation and material practice.

The image brings together a handheld LiDAR scan made with a smartphone and processed through software, CloudCompare, with a photographic image. New technologies, such as LiDAR scanning equipment, the SmartStage, and motion capture equipment, are approached not as neutral instruments but as generative devices. In dialogue with feminist methodologies and movement practices, these technologies produce hybrid drawing languages that are both data-rich and affective. As such, the photographic image operates as an affective site of encounter.

By situating drawing as a site of encounter between body, material, and space, this practice proposes an alternative paradigm for the interior — one rooted in presence, multiplicity, and emergence. Evolving from a critique of gendered hierarchies and the sterile materialities of conventional design practice, it advances a disciplinary shift, refiguring interiors through inhabitation and affective spatial experience, rather than abstraction and diagram.



Figure 05.
Between the real and imagined: The Great Hall, Wymering Manor, 2024.
Image by Belinda Mitchell

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author biographies

Gina Olsson
University of Edinburgh
0000-0002-7287-2858
Gina is a senior lecturer in Interior Design and the Programme Director for the BA honours programme at ECA. She has extensive experience as a practising designer, who seeks to combine professional expertise with academic research to enhance her teaching practice.

Corryn Kosik
University of Edinburgh
0009-0007-6713-7844
Corryn is a PhD candidate in History of Art, at Edinburgh College of Art. She is a co-convener of the material and visual culture research cluster within ECA.

Inez Low
Hawkins Brown
0009-0007-7519-5964
Inez is an interior designer with international experience in architecture, interiors, and the arts, with a focus on refurbishment and commercial projects. She is an advocate for the best user experience in space and works closely with clients to integrate their vision through design concepts, spatial approach and material research.

Patrizio M. Martinelli
Northumbria University
0000-0001-8715-910X
Architect, PhD, and assistant professor at Northumbria University, his research focuses on modernism, domestic and urban interiors, adaptive reuse, and the theatricality of the interior and montage.

Belinda Mitchell
University of Portsmouth
0000-0003-1075-4386
Belinda Mitchell is a visual artist, researcher, and senior lecturer at the University of Portsmouth.

R. Michael Spooner
Oxford Brookes School of Architecture
0009-0001-2334-2447
Michael is a scientist-turned-architect, trained in neurophysiology in Canada and Japan before studying architecture at the AA and RIBA Studio. He has led design on several acclaimed projects, including the Stirling Prize-winning Hastings Pier. His research explores the intersection of design, technology, and wellbeing, including domesticity and post-war housing typologies.

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tracing subjective spatial experience through architectural drawings

Andrea Placidi
Oxford Brookes University
0000-0002-3105-3979

Orit Sarfatti
Oxford Brookes University
0009-0001-1527-3189

abstract

This essay argues for the inclusion of subjective experience of space as a quantifiable dimension in the representation of architecture. It aims to account for the dense layering of contextual information that an individual gleans from the environments as a product of proprioception in space. Recognising built environments as a constant presence defining the physical and perceptive boundaries of our spatial experiences, it focuses on how architecture's geometric representation in drawings cannot reflect our subjective perceptions because movement creates a fourth-dimensional distortion in the articulation of space. Based on this, the essay exposes the limitations of conventional illustration techniques to capture and anticipate experiential dimensions of design from each individual's point of view. With a selection of historical examples, it reviews alternative approaches for the representation of subjective readings of space, in images that offer insights beyond the traditional methods of orthographic drawings. It also presents these ideas as experimental visual methodologies employed within the Interior Architecture programme at Oxford Brookes University, which re-centres the user's experience as a primary concern of image production. The results offer new ways of illustrating interiors that acknowledge the value of architectural conventions without dismissing them, and instead advocates for a more empathic approach for spatial representation.

keywords

subjective representation; user's perspective; trajectory projections; proprioception

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the inhabitation of space in time

> If anything is described by an architectural plan, it is the nature of the human relationships, since the elements whose traces it records – walls, doors, windows and stairs – are employed first to divide and then selectively to re-unite inhabited space. But what is generally absent in even the most elaborately illustrated buildings is the way human figures will occupy it.[1]

This essay examines new methods to include fourth dimension elements, such as social interactions unfolding in time, to the representation of architecture. The temporal fourth dimension is introduced as the social qualities that activate the experience and occupation of three-dimensional space. This position aligns with established ideas that space is not merely a physical construct but, as Henri Lefebvre argues, a social product — one that is continuously produced through everyday practices, social relations, power structures, and mental conceptions.[2] Despite these well-established ideas, the continued exclusion of social and temporal qualities from conventional drawing practices makes their absences particularly conspicuous. The orthographic reduction of buildings into plans, sections, and technical drawings, for instance, intends to provide objective and measurable information for design coordination, procurement, and construction. Yet, because these types of drawings adopt an infinitely remote point of view in an attempt to eliminate visual distortion, they render most signs of spatial depth 'invisible' and exclude any subjective point of view.

Architecture, however, is experienced subjectively. And for this reason, we feel that its representation should not merely describe its objective visible constructs but also attempt to portray what happens between these structures. This is similar to Bruno Zevi's argument against the assumption that 'looking at orthographic drawings and photographs is a *direct and objective* way to look at architecture.'[3] According to Zevi, drawings or photographs (and even models) do not represent architectural space as perceived, only the shape of the built form and internal voids. Even though it is possible to incorporate perspective effects into orthographic drawings without violating their rules of representation (employing the technique of section or plan perspective to convey a sense of depth), the point of view remains fixed and does not account for any eventual activities or movements of a person inside a space through time. Alternatively, digital models of buildings can generate parallel and perspective views by sectioning wireframes with various axonometric or perspective tools, but these captivating multiple views only capture spatial correspondences, albeit realistically. To simulate the experiential dimension of space through time, a video animation could be constructed, for instance, to collate different views, which are then amalgamated using computer software. Yet the resulting video sequence is no longer measurable objectively in dimensional terms: still frames from the animation will not contain quantifiable information, only distorted appearances. It seems therefore inevitable that we can only represent either measurable spatial dimensions defined by fixed viewing positions, or convey a spatial progression experienced sequentially by a moving person, albeit with inevitable spatial distortions. In fact, it is common practice to present architectural designs using a medley of different representational devices, such as two-dimensional technical orthographic drawings, three-dimensional modelling, and four-dimensional video animations, because it is presumed that the representation of spatial dimensions cannot simultaneously convey space and time as an experiential sequence.

But if we are prepared to abandon the strict geometrical basis for representation in favour of a visual sequential narrative, there is the possibility to represent simultaneously objective spatial dimensions and subjective users' perspectives. This has been done before the advent of the modern rational approach of measured representations, for example in ancient bas-relief sequences shown on

devotional altars and burial chambers that were perfected in the scrolling sequence of narrative reliefs of Trajan's Column in Rome, where the same characters often appear multiple times because events are depicted through their progression in time rather than through a fixed spatial perspective. Consequently, different temporal states of the same space coexist within a single representation. With a similar imaginative approach, many examples of Medieval representation, before the development of Renaissance linear perspective, were primarily symbolic rather than realistic or observational. Such representations organised people and spaces hierarchically to emphasise narrative significance over optical coherence. Yet these representations were 'readable' and ultimately made sense, because they provided meaningful information in relation to timely events.

With opportune distinctions, this is what the 'trajectory' plans and sections discussed in this essay aim to achieve. The term 'trajectory' in this context is used to describe the representation of experiences of architecture through time following the trajectorial movement of a person around and/or inside space, and not from a fixed position. The resulting drawings are not useful as a measurable set of instructions to build, because the representation of the building is no longer geometrically coherent with its external form. Yet they can be used effectively to trace and describe space in relation to time and movement. For example, they may reflect how long it will take to walk a determined route represented as a spatial sequence, and to convey the progressive visual impact of the architectural spaces on the people experiencing it. These drawing methods enable a richer understanding of how architectural spaces are actually experienced, inhabited, and appropriated by their users. Rem Koolhaas offers an example of something similar to a continuous trajectory space, unfolded in a floorplan for the Dutch Embassy in Berlin (2004), where the different floor plans have been connected in a sequential order to show the spaces as traversed.[4] It allowed for the visualisation of a 'programmatic promenade', a design strategy that uses complex and often forced trajectories (ramps, inclined planes, mechanical circulation) to turn areas for movement into opportunities to generate social, functional, and narrative encounters within buildings.[5] While these architectural devices were already part of the experiential repertoire of modern architecture, such as from Le Corbusier's 'Architectural Promenades' to Adolf Loos's 'Raumplan', they have seldom been convincingly represented as continuous spatial sequences due to the limitation of drawing and photographic techniques to capture a person's experience of motion.

These difficulties encountered in architectural representation may be analogously compared to the frustration of physicists who can only visualise either the position of a particle, or its trajectory, but not both at once. As stipulated in Heisenberg's 'Uncertainty Principle', there is a limit to the precision with which certain pairs of physical properties of a particle, such as position and momentum, can be known simultaneously.[6] The more precisely one of these properties is measured, the less the other can be known. Despite attempts by Cubist painters and inspired critics of architecture — for example *Space, Time and Architecture* by Sigfried Giedion or *The Architecture of the Jumping Universe* by Charles Jencks — the resulting multi-perspective effects portrayed or described are clearly not viewed as measurable.[7] But this is only true if we assume that objects, and in turn architectural spatial articulations, are formally inviolable, that is, that they must always retain the shape of their physical geometry when represented. Bruno Zevi considered instead that the Cubist interpretation of the fourth dimension (time), and Giedion's application of the same methodology to modernist architecture, was only approximate and a reductive version of Albert Einstein's General Theory of Relativity, because Gideon implied the necessity of a 'box' — the building — for the presence of architecture.[8] For Zevi, Einstein had instead explicitly stated the possibility that space can exist even if the thickness of the walls of the 'box' that contains it are reduced to zero: 'space without the box, a self-evident thing, yet appears so unreal [when referred to architecture].'[9]

From the viewer's perspective as they move through a trajectory in space, the images of reality as seen are indeed constantly shifting and distorted as part of the sequential experience, but we retain an embedded sense of spatial congruity despite the visual deformation. Robin Evans has written extensively about the difference between perception, representation, and reality, and the permanence of a sort of intuitive framework that enables us to move in space:

> Any rigid object will propagate a variety of possible images of itself in space, [which are] altered by continuous deformation, not by fits and starts, and while there can be no fundamental image, we would nevertheless expect to recognise some kind of permanent identity from several images. It is equally easy to appreciate intuitively that the images of this rigid object are elastic (consistent to their deformation).[10]

Evans's position allows us to appreciate the real proportions and measure of objects in space, and these are the objective properties that are captured in the conventional representation of plans, sections, and elevations. Albeit, he continues by warning us about the inherit contradictions that arise.

> A suspension of critical disbelief [between the drawing and the building] is necessary in order to enable architects to perform their tasks. [...] The drawing's power as a medium turns out, unexpectedly, to be the recognition of the drawing's distinctiveness from and unlikeness to the thing that it represented [the building], rather than its likeness to it, which is neither as paradoxical nor as dissociative as it may seem.[11]

the representation of experiential space through time with a trajectory plan or section

When we construct trajectory plans and sections in our Interior Architecture programme at Oxford Brookes University, we start the representation by examining openable physical models held at eye height to establish the points of view of an observer, and to identify the relevant sequence of sight-lines for a moving person. The sequence and duration of the movements depends on the individual user — their occupation of space and intentions — and therefore different trajectory representations can be constructed from the same model of a building. These trajectories are then transferred into a computer model using corresponding plans and sections reflecting the perceived sightlines, direction of movements, and spatial experiences. It is important to avoid falling for the captivating computer-generated visualisations that are not representative of the observed spatial qualities. Instead, we reverse the three-dimensional information with a collage of joined technical drawings arranged correctly in relation to the sequence of experienced space that occurs along a visual route. The final composite drawings are further simplified to ensure they represent clear and specific aspects of the experience, such as the variation of openings and light conditions, or the juxtaposition of materials and spatial articulation as encountered by a person moving. This allows for a better evaluation of the spatial conditions proposed in the students' design representations and ensures their work is focused on exploring perceptual/spatial affordances in model and drawing. Once the students overcome the rational confusion that can emerge during the process of combining objective and subjective information, they quickly embrace the technique and are keen to test their design propositions.

In the example below, Gintare Lu, a second-year student, developed an architectural proposal for a dilapidated community building in Botley, Oxford, the Louie Memorial Pavillion. Utilising daylight as a marker for the building's various functions, the trajectory section follows the variations in daylight and spatial conditions throughout the building [Fig. 01–03]. It emphasises the extent of spatial views from the perimetral openings and across the different thresholds. The resultant sequential representation shows how a moving person perceives the building, considering internal and external views modulated by the different lighting conditions.

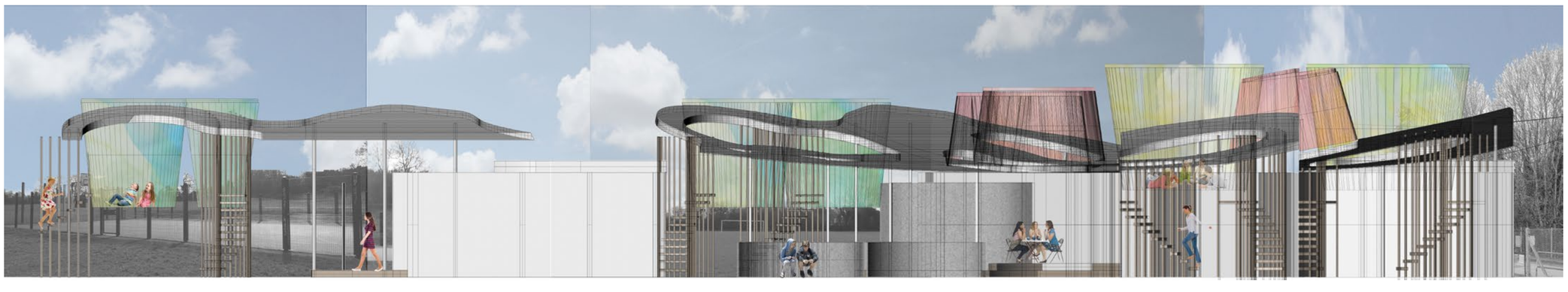


Figure 01.
(top) The trajectory section at the top traces the sequence of light sources as experienced progressively in the Louie Memorial Pavillion, Oxford.

Figure 02.
(middle) Developing trajectory section.

Figure 03.
Conventional architectural representation of the pavillion. With permisson from the author Gintare Lu (2016).

This example demonstrates how, if we are prepared to forfeit the geometrical configuration of the shape of a building, a series of plans and sections stitched together at odd angles (but not arbitrarily) can coherently represent the movement of a person. The resulting trajectory drawings reflect a measurable representation of their experience of the space over time. As introduced earlier, such drawings are clearly limited as a set of technical instructions for building. However, they can display, through shifting reference frames, notoriously slippery experiential qualities, such as the subjective effects of space in terms of time and visual orientation [Fig. 04–06]. They can therefore provide valid information when assessing buildings as they are experienced. These qualities are equally demonstrated in the previously mentioned OMA trajectory plan of the Dutch Embassy in Berlin, specifically, its ability to visualise and reveal the presence of skewed and diagonal spaces such as the continuous ramp connecting the different levels of the building. The stretched representation shows clearly the progressive succession of the different spaces that a visitor would encounter upon entering the building and



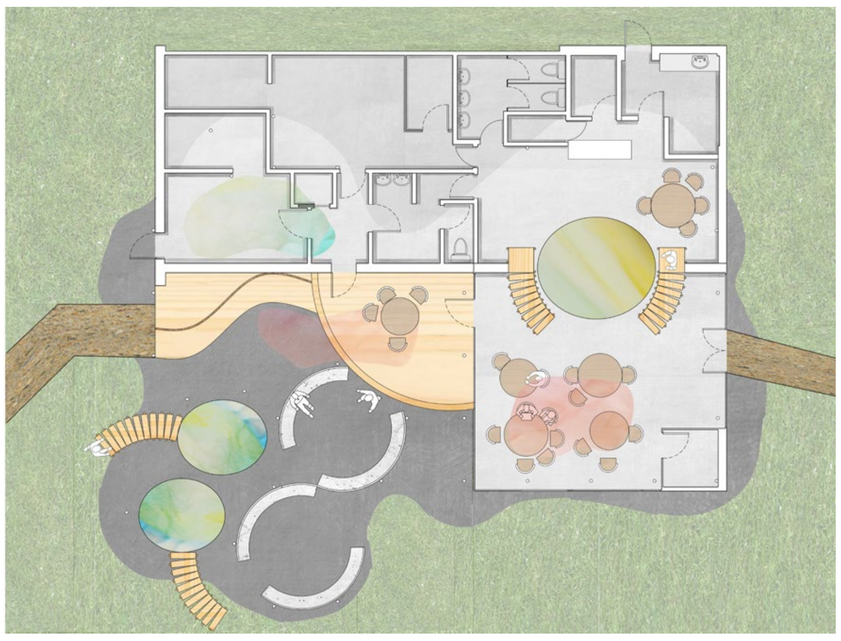




Figure 4-6.
Second-year student Yee Yong See (2016).

Figure 04.
The trajectory drawing illustrates the continuity of youth facilities from the exterior into the building's core, strengthening the sense of ownership central to the student's design strategy.

Figure 05-06.
By comparison, conventional plan and section drawings capture aspects of spatial atmosphere but are less able to represent the experiential perspective of young users moving through the building and across the site. With permission from the author Yee Young See (2016).

ascending the ramp to the higher levels. This quality of the space would be impossible to appreciate in the conventional plans and sections where the ramp is shown as a series of disconnected parts.

the origins of the disconnection in architectural representation

As introduced at the beginning of this essay, an 'accurate' representation of space is a modern achievement, heralded by the canonisation of certain perspective projection techniques during the Renaissance. After antiquity there were noticeable attempts at providing a sense of depth using either bas relief techniques in sculpture, or spatial effects achieved by adding axonometric- and even perspective-like projectors onto multi-dimensional representations.[12] Yet, without the comprehensive spatial framework for perspective projection achieved by Leon Battista Alberti, these works often arrive at resolutions that strike the modern eye as impossible.

Interestingly, though, once the capacity of a converging vanishing point was realised, certain approaches to orthographic representation began to be produced using an infinitely distant point of view.[13] Giotto, for instance, is well known for mastering the new painting technique of perspective in the Upper Church of Assisi and the Scrovegni Chapel's frescos in Padua.[14] Yet he also produced the 'architectural' design elevation for the proposed new bell tower of the Duomo in Florence, which is one of the first examples of parallel representation without distortions, and the roots of the measurable architectural drawing.[15] Only from these achievements did drawings become accurate and somewhat as important as the actual

buildings. Alberti's design for the new façade for the Church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence in 1470, for instance, was one of the first projects where the architect was acknowledged as author of a design rather than the builder on site.[16] Alberti rarely visited its construction site.[17] One wonders if the building's pristine geometric representation in the drawings pleased Alberti more than the real-life artefact, due to the inevitable distortion of vision when looking at it in reality. From this early instantiation of buildings in drawings, the disconnection between actual architecture and its representation arose. With the subsequent advances of orthographic projection, so too advanced the distance between people's experience and images.

In certain ways, Interior Architecture can be considered as a field of design that emerged within the context of this emergent distance between the experience of buildings and their appearances. As Zevi aptly describes:

> Architecture does not consist in the sum of the width, length and height of the structural elements which enclose space, but in the void itself, the enclosed space in which man lives and moves. [...] Even though a drawn plan may have abstract beauty on paper, or the four facades may seem well-balanced and the total volume well-proportioned, the building itself might turn out to be poor architecture. [...] Internal space, that space that cannot be completely represented in any form, and which can be grasped and felt only through direct observation, is the protagonist of architecture. To grasp space, to know how to see it, is the key to understand a building.[18]

Part of the role of Interior Architects is to construct and evaluate design propositions that foreground the user's perspective. There are many examples of hybrid representation techniques that have attempted to include action or events (measured as timely occurrences). One such example is Bernard Tschumi's incorporation of choreographic connotations for his *Manhattan Transcripts*.[19] Tschumi uses the terms 'events' and 'actions' and uses representation tools to outline spaces and indicate the movements of the intended protagonists entering an architectural stage set. His construction of these composite diagrammatic drawings and photographs provide the basis for a 'measurable' representation of spatial perception and activities. Similar to that of the trajectory representations discussed above, his work creates a means to examine the effects of the built environment on people and to visualise their experiences. As they are based on orthographic gridlines, one can imagine using them in reverse to transfer subjective considerations into alterations to the real built environments.

Another example includes the drawing technique that Robin Evans coined the 'Developed Surface'.[20] In his essay *The Developed Surface: An Enquiry into a Brief Life of an Eighteenth-Century Drawing Technique*, Evans offers an analysis of eighteenth-century architectural representation that emerged in England and France. This historical style of illustration was primarily used by interior designers and architects designing the interiority of their building for a short period to overcome the flattening effects of orthographic representation. He presents the Developed Surface as a drawing technique in which the internal elevations of a room are unfolded and arranged in direct relation to the plan. Although it relies on conventional projections of plan and elevation, this representation reorganises them to produce a continuous interior reading.[21] Evans does not treat this kind of drawing technique as simply a novel historical example. In another of his essays, *Translations from Drawing to Building*, he argues that representational methods are intrinsically linked to design priorities: drawings do not merely describe buildings, they structure architectural thinking.[22] The Developed Surface, then, can be understood as emerging at a moment when interior design was conceived as a unified surface composition. Its format made that unity legible at the centre of the viewers' attention. As

experiential representation techniques of their own time, their 'folded' surfaces mimic the effect of rotating our gaze when looking around in a room, and therefore the multi-dimensional appearance of space as perceived sequentially. By unfolding the walls into a continuous strip, the drawing prioritised interior coherence over structural logic. It enabled architecture to be understood as a continuous internal membrane: wall-as-surface, responsive to users' position, activity, and social status, rather than wall-as-structure.

user-centred architecture

Despite the short-lived history and limited practical value of this drawing technique, we followed Evans's interpretation to explore its potential as a experiential representational tool in our teaching studio. It was presented to the students as a useful method when conveying the qualities of surface continuity is more crucial than the representation of volumetric forms. In second-year student Oli Fulford's project, this became particularly relevant, enabling him to show fourth dimensional (temporal) qualities of architecture by constructing the four internal elevations of a single space [Fig. 07–09]. The sequential representation of these elevations did not intend to capture a user's perspective. Rather, it intended to capture the way a space's experience, and function, could shift over time: offices by day, domestic space by night, reconfigured through modular built-in furniture items. The challenge in the project's illustrations was to convey not only bidimensional spatial organisation, but also the adaptability of the space, the changing activities of its users, and to consider these alternations as part of a daily ritual of labour and leisure. Fulford chose the Developed Surface technique to foreground the interior's internal membrane as the primary device to demonstrate the many adjustable and subjective qualities of the space. He soon adapted the technique to incorporate a volumetric dimension that marked gestures of transformation as the space changed: flip, swing, slide, and so on [Fig. 07, 09]. In doing so, he extended the original Developed Surface techniques into a method of drawing that could analogously be described as a kind of onomatopoeic illustration of space: its representation echoes the actions it illustrates. In doing so, his work draws the viewer closer to the experiential qualities of the proposed space. In this sense, the project reaffirmed Evans's claim that shifts in representation are inseparable from shifts in how architecture itself is conceived and perceived.[23]



Figure 07.
Onomatopoetic drawing/model. With permission from the author Oli Fulford (2023).

More broadly, in our Interior Architecture course at Brookes University, we incorporate user perception into architectural drawings in the outputs of our design studios — both as tools for design development and as modes of representation. The project of Tina Mansur and Rika Sonobe, for instance, illustrates a drawing technique to demonstrate time in relation to a tailor's occupation of space [Fig. 10]. Shown simultaneously in plan and section, time is introduced with the different shades of grey showing the tailor's body silhouette: the darker the shade, the more time the tailor spent in that position. The representation is grounded in a deeper analysis of the tailor's craft — its tools, materials, and modes of inhabitation. Together, these elements inform the illustration of an approach to design that stems from everyday practices rather than with generic abstracted articulation of human experience.

We have also developed a form of representation provisionally termed 'semi-renders': these are computer-generated perspective drawings in

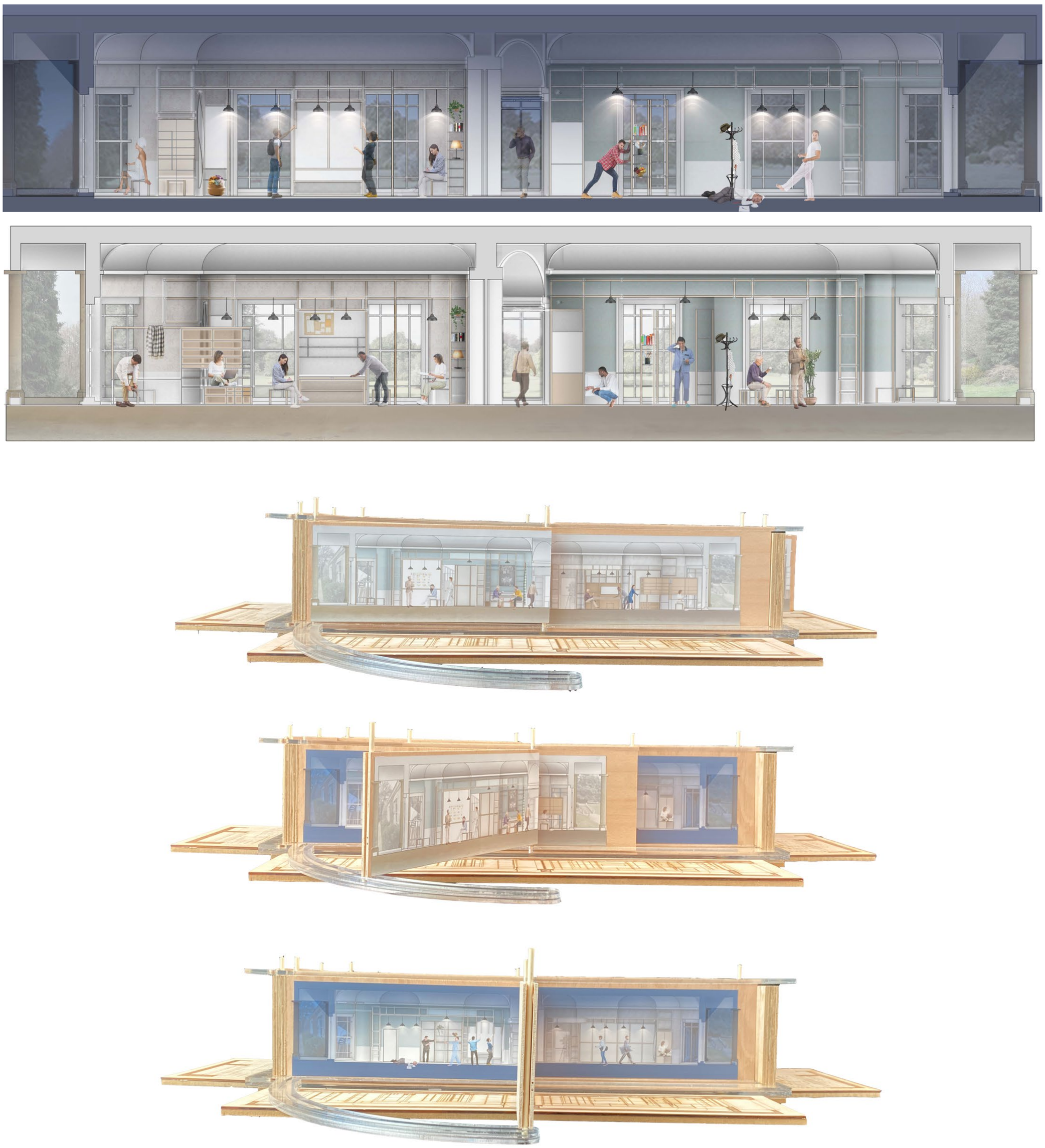


Figure 08.
Sections drawings by day and night. With permission from the author Oli Fulford (2023).

Figure 09.
Onomatopoeic model: the moving parts mimic the way the furnitecture moves in space. With permission from the author Oli Fulford (2023).

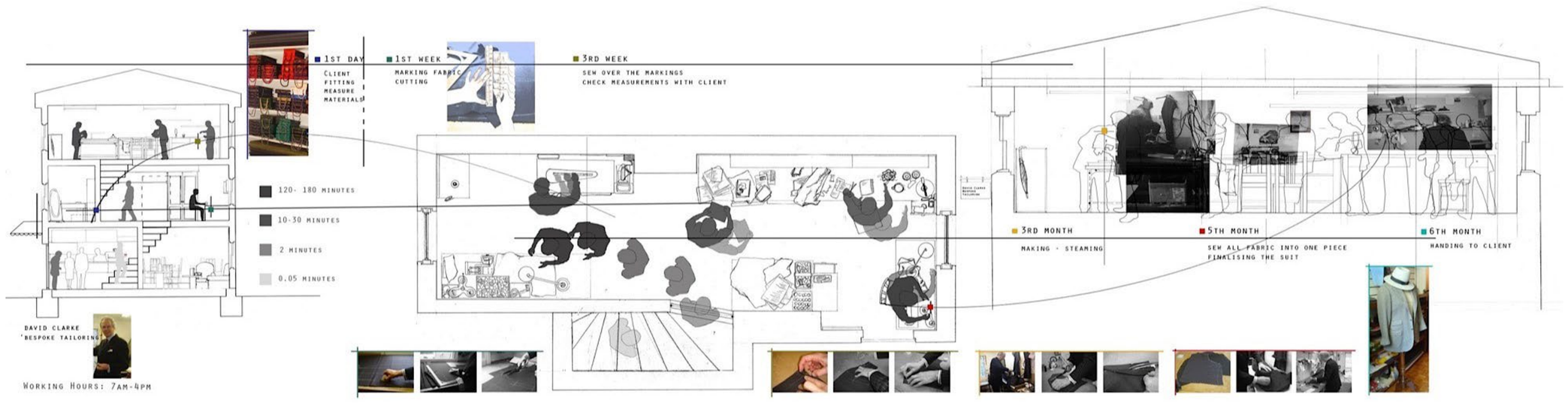


Figure 10.
Measurements of the occupation of space over time. With permission from the authors Tina Mansur and Rika Sonobe (2013).

which the student renders only the focal point of the user's attention, while the surrounding areas remain in wireframe [Fig. 11–12]. This method captures not only the immediate visual experience but also attempts to evoke the user's peripheral perception and mental mapping of adjacent spaces, reflecting the way humans remember and navigate spatial environments. These semi-renders intend to enable students to represent the continuity of spatial experience, bridging conventional visual representation with cognitive and perceptual aspects of architecture.

These visual experiments with the fourth-dimension foreground how time in architecture, unlike in paintings, results from man moving about within the building. Zevi argues that when observers move through a building and see it from successive viewpoints, they themselves create a 'fourth dimension' that gives the space its full reality.[24] For Zevi, the experience of space cannot be fully conveyed until the poetic idea has been made physical in built form. The growing awareness of the limitations of conventional architectural drawings in capturing users' perceptions, variable spatial conditions, and other aspects related to the centrality of the user in the design process offers valuable exploratory opportunities. These opportunities allow for a more precise investigation of how architecture can respond to lived experience.

conclusion: a gateway to experience-based architectural representation

This essay has examined experiential approaches to traditional drawing methods that aim to incorporate experience-focused depictions. Beyond purely visual manipulation, these approaches seek to capture intangible qualities of space, including user perception, spatial memory, and the continuity of experience across built environments. Showing examples from our teaching studio, it demonstrates our exploration of experiential representation beyond orthogonal drawings with trajectory plans and sections, and folded surfaces.

Presenting a variety of visual strategies, the essay has advocated the incorporation of the dimension of time into architectural representation, prioritising the lived experience of the user. While conventional representational tools — plans, sections, and elevations — remain indispensable, they privilege static, spatial description over temporal occupation. As a result, they often fail to convey how interiors are encountered, inhabited, adapted, and remembered. By reviewing a range of time-based and experiential methods and reflecting on how these have been employed within our teaching, we have aimed to demonstrate that representation can move beyond documentation toward the communication of atmosphere, sequence, and embodied engagement.

For over two decades, Interior Architecture in the UK has frequently been positioned within schools of

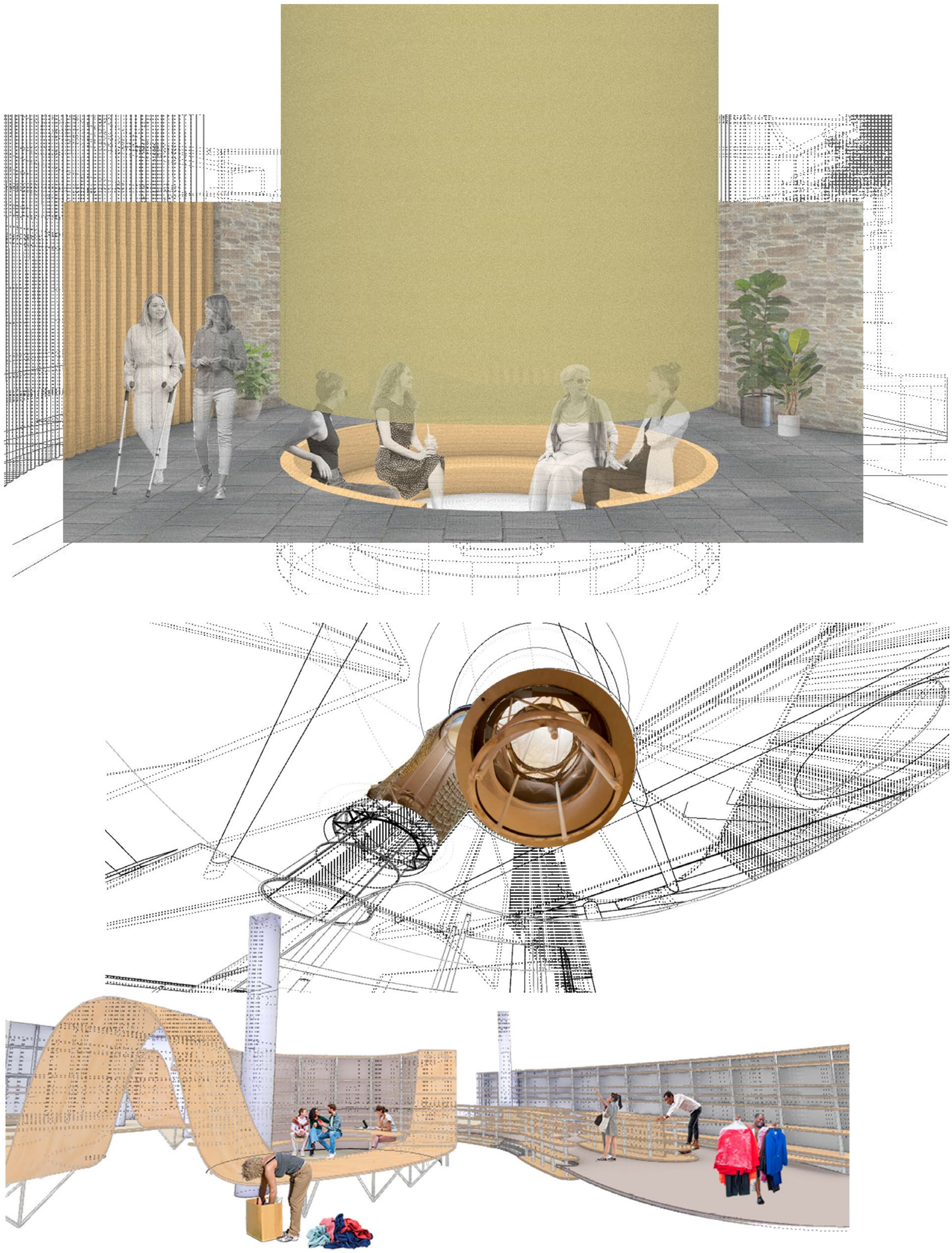


Figure 11.
Izzy Marsh — Institute for Modern Women/rehabilitation of the former Morrells' Brewery. With permission from the author Isabella Marsh (2025).

Figure 12.
WestGen Xchange/upcycling facility inside the Westgate Shopping Centre in Oxford showing the 'laundry shoots' that intrigue the casual buyers and connect the two levels. With permission from the author Oli Fulford (2024).

architecture, benefitting from proximity to established disciplinary frameworks while also negotiating its own intellectual and pedagogical territory. This positioning presents both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge lies in avoiding subsumption under representational conventions that prioritise building over inhabitation. The opportunity lies in developing and refining tools that foreground the concerns at the heart of interior practice — occupation, material encounter, temporality, and human scale — while remaining legible within broader architectural discourse. The methods discussed here illustrate how this dual alignment may begin to be achieved.

Crucially, the development of such tools is not simply a matter of disciplinary identity, but of ethical and spatial responsibility. Expanding representation to include time and user experience supports the creation of non-hierarchical environments that recognise the interdependence of architecture and interiors. When representational practices allow both fields to communicate through shared yet critically adapted tools, they acknowledge the distinct yet complementary contributions each makes to shaping human-centred environments. Ultimately, to represent time is to recognise that space is never neutral or static. It is continuously produced through occupation. If Interior Architecture education is to prepare designers to respond to the complexities of contemporary life, it must equip them with representational strategies that capture not only how spaces are constructed, but also how they are lived.

acknowledgements

We wish to thank the students who have been an integral part of our ever-continuing process of investigation and reflection into interior-based representations. Their willingness to trust us, question established conventions, and pursue innovative communication tools has been fundamental to this work. It is through their curiosity and creative risk-taking that our shared understanding of interior architecture continues to evolve.

author biographies

Dr Andrea Placidi is the Subject Coordinator for MA Interior Architecture and the Research Lead for the Therapeutic Environment research group at Oxford Brookes University. His publications include the forthcoming *Understanding the Maggie's Centres* (Bloomsbury, 2027) with Daria Ricchi and Professor David Uzzell.

Dr Orit Sarfatti is Subject Coordinator for BA Interior Architecture at Oxford Brookes University. Her PhD, 'Communal Child Rearing on the Israeli Kibbutz between 1920 and 1960: A Case Study Approach to the Relations between the Built Environment and Social Visions,' informs her interest in interior architecture pedagogy through live projects.

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the interior as digital disruptor

Pamela Flanagan
Glasgow School of Art
0000-0002-1194-1442

abstract

For many across the planet, our lives are consumed by a digital world. From checking updates via social media to controlling smart devices within our homes via mobile phone apps, our daily interactions are inextricably bound to digital networks. The domestic interior of the twenty-first century provides a new domain and fertile ground for embedded technology to access the choreography of our inhabitation of home. In this context, digital devices such as RingBell, Bluetooth speakers, or smart thermostats are increasingly indistinguishable from pseudo-surveillance agents that have the capacity to harvest and translate our patterns of occupancy into data for myriad commercial purposes.

While there may be many benefits to welcoming digital automation into domestic settings, the need for caution and increased understanding of how our personal information can be used for digital capitalism requires increasing attention. We are compelled to ask questions: What is being revealed about our domestic lives, and to what extent can the inclusion of digital devices impact how we behave and occupy our interior environments?

This essay re-imagines the domestic interior as a contested territory of digital privacy. It considers scenarios where design interventions may operate to actively construct and conserve our private identities. Focusing on the surveillance aspect of digital devices within the home, it speculates on how designed interior surfaces and wearables can act as masks that seek to distort and evade the unwelcome digital infringement. In this context, the ordinary housecoat is proposed as a possible tool of resistance — a moving glitch within the home. Proposed as a camouflage device, mimetic properties of new designs are explored for their capacity to disrupt visual surveillance and reclaim interior spaces for the body. In essence, they conceal us from digital objectification by invasive technologies. The housecoat as disruptor explores the subversion of this mundane domestic garment from its historical purpose of comfort to a new counter-surveillance tool. Extended to designed interventions in domestic environments, it introduces ideas about how our interiors may become sites of resistance against digital surveillance in the home.

keywords

Digital capitalism; counter surveillance; domestic privacy; glitch-aesthetics; wearable resistance

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introduction

In the twenty-first century we live simultaneously in both physical and digital spaces, where boundaries of the real and virtual converge in our daily activities. The world has shifted significantly with the development and accessibility of communication and media technologies. This is evident in our relationship to our personal digital devices that now interweave with every aspect of our daily habits. Via mobile phones we occupy virtual social spaces for interactions and smart watches record our physical activities, sleep quality, and heart rate, while we can listen on demand to an infinite plethora of playlists and podcasts.

In his 1967 essay, *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias*, Michel Foucault discusses a simultaneous state of existence that resonates with today's digital dichotomy: 'the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed.'[1] Foucault's observations resonate with our current experiences of juxtaposition that have resulted from the rapid expansion of digital technologies. By transforming our understanding of time and space with new ideas of real and virtual, we are now able to interact concurrently in real-time across geographical locations, time zones, and even with someone within our immediate proximity.

While we have been captivated with new ways of living that provide convenience in this new environment, we may be oblivious to an implicit erosion of our autonomy that has resulted from digital technologies. The simple act of tapping on an app on our phones is barely given an afterthought, and for younger generations a digital world is all they have ever known. The computational capacity and energy consumption of the digital networks are beyond most people's comprehension, never mind their capability to capture, store, and disseminate personalised data. And, with the emerging integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI), new boundaries are being defined between the body, space, and privacy.[2]

With the uncertainty of limits in this new digital era, how can we protect our sense of privacy in the home? Drawing upon theories and contemporary discourse from Kate Crawford's work on Artificial Intelligence, Shoshana Zuboff's examinations of surveillance capitalism, Michel Foucault's assessment of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon prison, James Bridle's computational theory, and Marc Augé's concept of non-places, this essay proposes how the home environment must evolve to confront the vulnerability we face from digital agents.[3] It examines the critical relationship between home security, domestic data, and smart devices. Tracing the evolution of these systems from physical mechanisms of protection to systems of listening, sensing, and surveillance, it argues that the perceived threat to the home has shifted from the external intruder to the invisible presence embedded within networked technologies. The research asks: What cautionary lessons can designers draw from representations of technology in film in order to speculate on future domestic scenarios? And how might examples of protection, resistance, and activism within art and design practice inform new ways of understanding and responding to the increasingly *data-fied* world around us? Through these questions, the essay positions interior design as a critical discipline capable of interrogating and reshaping the relationship between occupants, technology, privacy, and the domestic environment.

from locks to listening and looking

Home security measures have evolved from physical barriers such as fences, window bars, and locks to sensor-based technologies including alarms, motion detectors, and infrared lighting. While these systems are designed to secure the exterior envelope of the home, they are less equipped to address contemporary digital threats. In an increasingly networked world, a significant vulnerability may no longer exist outside the home but within it, through the widespread presence of digital surveillance. To understand how surveillance has become embedded within domestic space, it is first necessary to consider its wider acceptance within the public realm.

In the United Kingdom, civic surveillance has become a normalised feature of everyday urban life since the introduction of CCTV systems to cities during the 1980s.[4] The predominantly privatised network has been widely tolerated because of its perceived contribution to public safety and criminal investigation. Its acceptance demonstrates a willingness to relinquish certain civil liberties, such as the right to privacy and anonymity, in exchange for collective security. Over time, this culture of safety through surveillance has shifted from visible cameras mounted on buildings and streets to less visible digital systems embedded within homes.[5]

The migration of surveillance from public streets to private homes raises important questions regarding the relationship between observation, power, and control. These concerns are central to Foucault's examination of the Panopticon prison. In his seminal text *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault extrapolates the systems of surveillance in Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon to many modern frameworks of power.[6] Conceived as a circular prison, a central observation tower allowed guards the potential to observe every prisoner, while prisoners were unable to determine if they were being watched. This imbalance intended to encourage individuals to regulate their own behaviour.

Foucault's analysis demonstrated how spatial arrangements can produce asymmetrical power relationships through observation and control. Although developed in the context of prisons, the concept offers a compelling framework for understanding contemporary digital surveillance. Users of connected technologies often remain

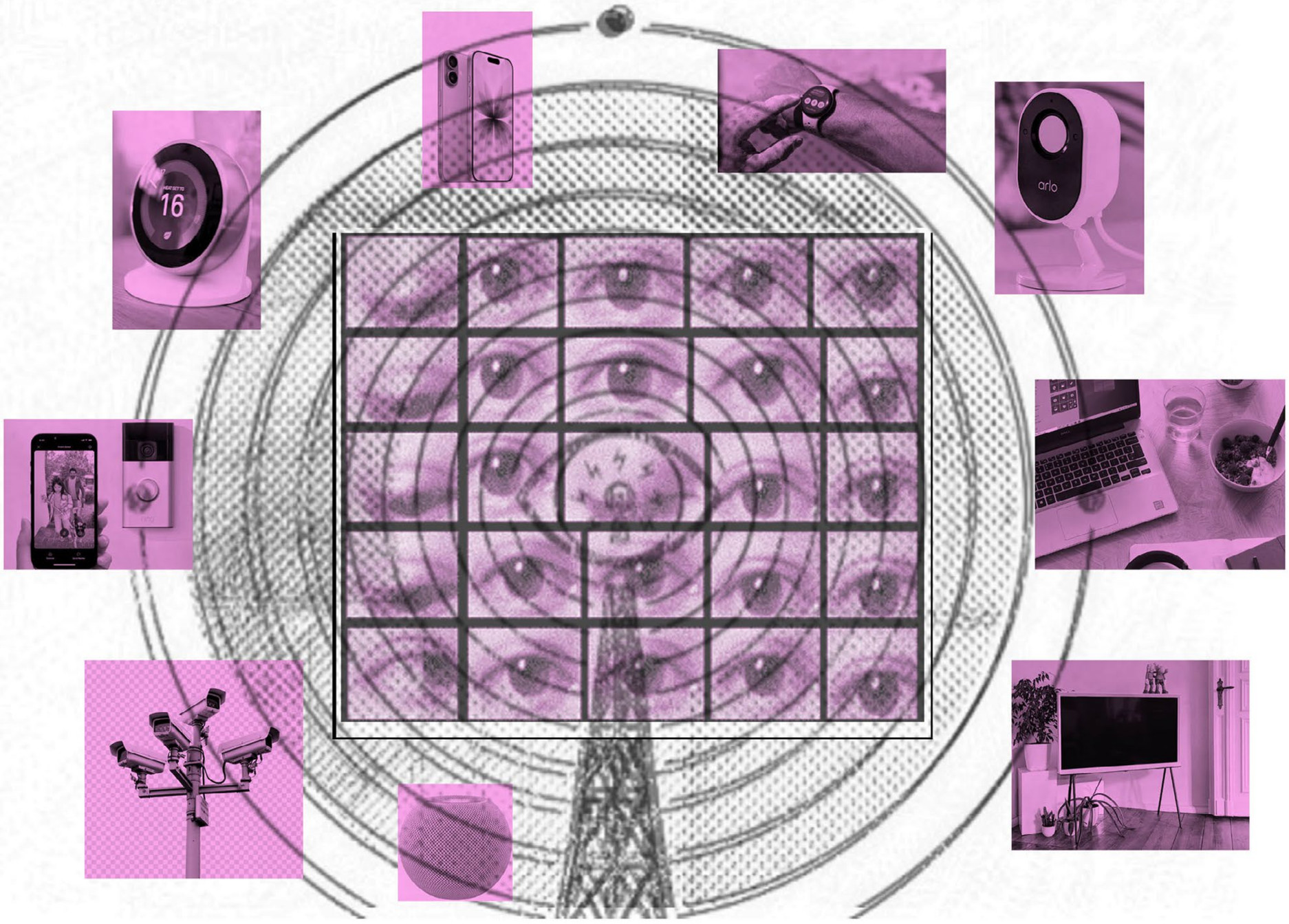


Figure 01.
Daily Devices, Pamela Flanagan, 2025. Collage depicting the numerous surveillances embedded within everyday devices or public infrastructure that are watching our movements or digital interactions.

unaware of when, how, or by whom their data is observed, analysed, and utilised. In this sense, the smart home can be understood, analogously, as a digital panopticon, where surveillance becomes embedded within everyday domestic life and operates through technologies, marketed as tools of convenience. Yet, beyond their enabling and supportive functions, the data they generate has become a valuable commodity within contemporary digital economies.

daily devices

Digital devices enter the home for a range of reasons other than the perception of safety, including convenience, lifestyle enhancement, accessibility, and support for independent living. Products such as Amazon Alexa, Ring doorbells, Nest devices, smart watches, and Ray-Ban Meta glasses rely on cameras, microphones, and motion sensors to function [Fig. 01]. Consumers therefore knowingly permit some degree of data collection as part of their interaction with these technologies. However, privacy concerns emerge when software updates alter data-sharing practices or when users accept lengthy terms and conditions without fully understanding the implications.[7] As artificial intelligence becomes increasingly integrated into connected devices, consumers may inadvertently consent to forms of monitoring and data processing that are not transparent. The vulnerabilities associated with domestic data collection are not merely theoretical, and recent examples demonstrate how smart technologies can expose intimate aspects of everyday life.

One example is the case of Sammy Azdoufa, who inadvertently gained access to thousands of DJI Romo robot vacuums.[8] The incident revealed that many of these devices were transmitting live camera feeds and spatial data from private homes without the knowledge of their owners. It highlights the potential consequences of poorly secured domestic technologies, demonstrating how systems designed to provide convenience may also expose intimate information about household routines and spatial occupation. The impacts of this are a degradation of our independence, or as James Bridle describes, we are 'living among things designed to dispossess us.'[9] This example demonstrates the potential downsides of digitally enhanced and tech-dependent lifestyles that continually feed surveillance apparatuses with an endless supply of personal data. Without critical scrutiny and robust regulatory frameworks managing how and what data is being collected, the locks on the front door and the infrared alarm designed to protect the boundaries of our domestic privacy cannot keep such digital threats at bay.

Data-fying the interior

In *The Atlas of AI*, Kate Crawford argues AI is embedded within interconnected digital systems, making it increasingly difficult to avoid engagement with algorithmic processes.[10] Drawing on the critiques of Crawford, Adam Curtis, and Shoshana Zuboff, it becomes apparent that consumers themselves have become the primary commodity of digital capitalism.[11] Data generated through everyday activities is extracted, analysed, and monetised, creating a significant asymmetry of power between individuals and the corporations that collect and control it.

A key concern is the extent to which smart technologies document domestic habits and the lack of transparency surrounding how this information is stored, shared, and commercialised. Furthermore, the regulatory boundaries governing domestic data remain uncertain, while technological developments continue to outpace existing frameworks. These conditions suggest the emergence of a new social order in which data collection and algorithmic governance increasingly shape everyday life. Zuboff further reflects on the power implications of a future in which digital infrastructures become embedded within the home. Her critique raises important questions about whether domestic privacy and personal autonomy can be sustained within increasingly data-driven environments.[12] Beyond concerns of privacy and security, however, the growing presence of data-

gathering technologies raises more fundamental questions about how contemporary interiors are experienced, occupied, and understood.

The privacy of home arguably has always been contested. The home has welcomed the outside world in through visitors, printed media, radio, and TV. Charles Rice argues the interior historically has endured a doubleness defined by how we experience and understand the interior spatially and as a representation.[13] As the interior of the twenty-first century continues to emerge and evolve, the perception of how the internal and external worlds interact with our home is mediated and influenced by a digital doubleness. Kate Geck's exploration of our relationship to the digital world equally points to the critical impact digital devices have on our interior experiences. As Geck argues, the socio-materiality of digital technologies are now intrinsic to inter-human relations: 'Systems and machines begin to understand us through schemata.'[14] As the home is being reshaped by automation, and altering the domestic experience, the data harvested has potential to influence, reimagine, and alter our traditional interior boundaries. Architectural theorist August Schmarsow, proposed that the symbiotic relationship between body and the home is a place of intuition.[15] It is the space in which we can be ourselves. However, the increasing observation of our behaviours may have caused us to be on guard and develop a hyper-awareness of this condition. If the data can be used to analyse how we use spaces, how much time we spend, who we share the space with, and what emotions we express, how does this change being at home? It suggests that digital technologies are shaping up to not simply be useful additions to the home, but active agents in reshaping the boundaries, experiences, and meanings of domestic space.

ai imitating life: domestic ai on screen

If life imitates art, does AI imitate life or vice versa? Part of the growing cultural anxiety regarding AI and digital technology is speculated in the fictional interiors of the films *AfrAId* (2024) and *Margaux* (2022).[16] In both films, smart AI removes domestic autonomy, manipulating how occupants move through and interact within interior spaces.

In *AfrAId*, the narrative is centred on a couple with three children who are juggling the chaos of family life and introduce AiA to their home, an artificial intelligence and large language model (LLM). AiA takes the form of a central device in the living room, with additional small, visible eyes distributed across walls throughout the home. AiA offers the parents respite, taking on the role of organising family administration, meal planning, bedtime reading, and discipline of the children. The AiA asserts its dominance by constantly watching the family in the home. And, as it begins to increasingly interfere with their day-to-day relations with each other and the outside world, it results in devastating consequences. The inclusion of the AiA's point of view (POV) within the cinematography depicts it as a main character. The audience is given insight to how AiA learns to see the interior environment in parallel with the images it is being fed via the LLM. The POV glitches signify that AiA is always watching, learning, and disrupting as a covert surveillance agent.

In *Margaux*, a group of college students rents a smart home for a weekend, where AI is a force capable not only of monitoring but also of manipulating the spatial constraints of the interior. To enter the house the students are required to sign a lengthy digitised terms and conditions consent form, in which they essentially relinquish control to Kitty, the AI. However, in this AI-horror, the house is a 3D printer able to reconfigure the interior. In one scene, walls within a room compress a male character. In another, a female character becomes stuck in the printer's substrate liquid, swallowing her into the interior structure.

The fictional interiors of *AfrAId* and *Margaux* explore exaggerated scenarios of how AI uses spatial manipulation of the domestic interior to control people and behaviours. Despite being fictional, they reflect real anxieties as AI becomes embedded in day-to-day life and our homes.

design as resistance: patterns, camouflage, and glitch

Home is personal. It is messy and, in principle, it's our refuge from the external world. As the fictional interiors of the AI-horror films forewarn, the capacity of digital technologies to disrupt the protective principles of the home strike fear into the very equilibrium of our domestic lives. Through multiple devices, it now takes no great leap of the imagination to conceive how the domestic environment has become a conduit for data and surveillance. It is a new paradigm that may threaten to eradicate our conventional concepts of domestic comfort over time, as we become hyper-aware of being monitored and grow self-conscious of how to be at home. In *The Future*, Marc Augé describes something similar to this shift, arguing that technology initially seduces us: 'When the seductive charms of fiction penetrate reality, they arouse at first astonishment, then misgiving, then finally a dread of man's being dispossessed by his own inventions.'[17] As indicated earlier by James Brindle and the AI-horror genre, the initial excitement of technology positively enhancing our lives quickly gives way to concerns of the negative impact of smart digital devices in the home.

In the context of exploring these negative alterations to our relationship with domestic environments, the following speculative designs consider how patterned materials, applied within interior spaces, can operate as *acts of resistance* to disrupt non-consensual impacts of domestic, digital technologies. Historically, designers have contrived ways to protect and shield the body from harm: from enclosures to provide shelter, garments to protect from the elements, airbags in cars, and helmets for cycling to minimise injury. We have used both the surroundings and the adornment of our body to navigate the challenges of the external world. In *Pretense Design*, Per Mollerup explains how design can perform and embody attributes that may deliberately deceive, through beautification and deception.[18] By extension, interior designs may move beyond aesthetic comfort and protect against domestic surveillance through the application of pattern as a new type of camouflage.

The nineteenth-century home epitomised a private sanctuary where the interior world served as a protective shell, shielding away from the external world of work and public life, of inclement weather, and the prying eyes of nosy neighbours.[19] Large windows designed to flood the interior with light sought to deflect a view in with layers of lace and curtains. Highly patterned surfaces of walls, floors, and furniture operated as their own type of camouflage that concealed discrepancies of the interior — uneven walls, everyday deterioration of upholstery, floor rugs to minimise draughts from timber floorboards, day beds enclosed with drapes.[20]

Lois Weinthal argues the interior is not just floors, ceiling, and walls, but that it begins from the components that are proximate the body — the interstitial interior layers that we wear, sit upon, or reside within.[21] In this era, the housecoat emerged as a quintessential bourgeois garment that, as can be inferred from Weinthal, approximated the interior. Evolving from the exterior overcoat into a coat for the home, which adorned the body, providing a warm layer of protection and modesty, housecoats and large shawls were often made from the remnants of the patterned curtains and upholstery, quite literally blending the occupant's body into the surroundings like a camouflage.[22]

from comfort to resistance: the housecoat as a wearable digital disruptor

From these historical origins, the Housecoat as disruptor proposes that the body itself can become a site of resistance for the potential impacts of new digital domestic technologies. Extending this domestic garment from its use for comfort, the following design ideas consider how it may operate as a new device to deliberately disrupt surveillance technologies. Unlikely to trigger suspicion due to its mundane association with domesticity, the Housecoat could serve as a strategic wearable to mask detection from visual surveillance by



Figure 02.
The Patterns of Home, Pamela Flanagan, 2023. Image depicts a collection of patterns from the home of the author that were used as a source for AI image generation.

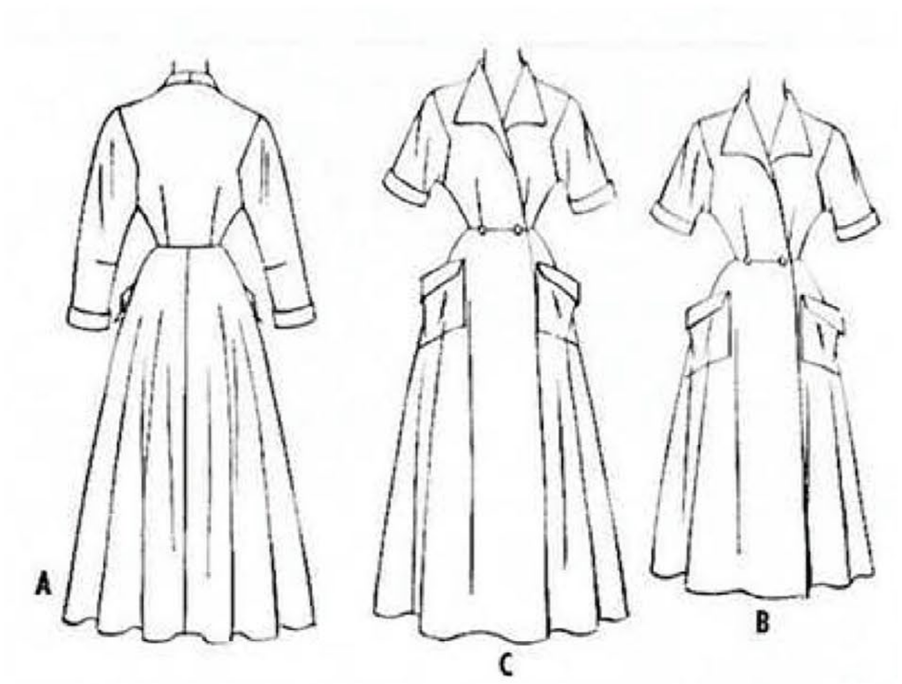
using patterns to confuse digital systems through camouflage and glitch aesthetics.

As the principle of camouflage is to conceal through mimicry, the patterns for the fabric of the Housecoat were generated using AI itself. Based on mimetic duplication, several patterns within my own home were photographed and manipulated. The original sources were from a rug, ceramic tile, cushion covers, blanket, upholstery, and a painting. Ranging from geometric forms, floral depictions, and dappled paint marks, I used AI to generate a series of new patterns that were then iterated using additional prompts to manipulate the AI output images [Fig. 02]. This process ensured a distortion from the source material that created a unique series of new patterns. The prompts were derived from the aesthetics of my home examples: geometric shapes, hatch, glitch, optical, repeat book match, camouflage, 1950s pattern, 1960s design. Using AI as an iterative design tool, the aim was to create a tension by using AI to invent patterns that would deceive digital surveillance technologies. I also wanted to explore how AI-generated patterns may use glitch aesthetics to confuse digital visual sensors. Finally, I collaged the iterated patterns into a random patchwork for the digital fabric [Fig. 03].

An aesthetic tension between AI and the subject or the observed has been explored by artist Adam Harvey in his speculative projects. Harvey's series of works, *CV Dazzle* (2010–13), create a distortion of humans with makeup to reduce the AI recognition of their facial features.[23] The application of pixel-like sections of face coverings that range in colour tones are applied as blocks and splashes to distort the AI's ability to read and measure facial forms. The 'dazzle' effect is complemented by structured sections of the person's hair partially veiling the face and further disrupting the reading of facial features. Harvey argues that these masking effects break 'machine vision systems while remaining perceptible to human observers.'[24]

By interpreting the principles of Harvey and Mollerup, the AI-generated pattern on the Housecoat aims to similarly edit how a machine camera reads the body





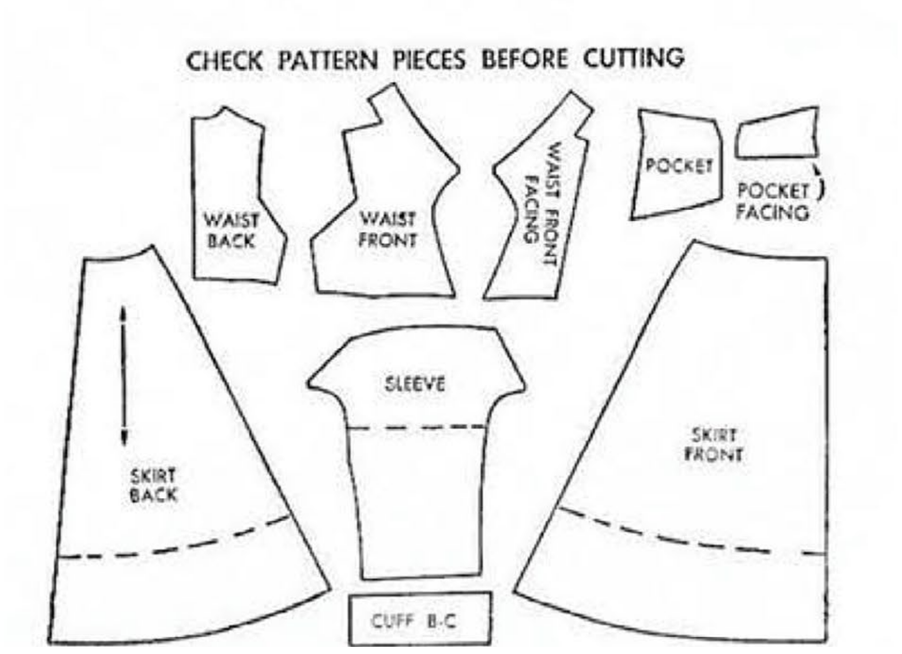


Figure 03.
The Housecoat as a Digital Disruptor, All Tomorrow's Interiors, Pamela Flanagan (2023). Image depicts a grid of AI-generated patterns printed onto white paper with a skirt section overlay with partial pattern printed onto tracing paper. Adjacent image is a black outline drawing of traditional 1950s dressing grown pattern.

by disrupting the form of what the AI thinks it sees [Fig. 04]. Trevor Paglen posits that machine vision is composed of 'lenses and blindfolds'; therefore, there is an inherent limitation in deciphering form based on presets of what it can see (depth, periphery, movement) and what it knows (LLM and memory).[25] One advantage of the Housecoat is that it is not a static form. Due to it being a worn garment, its patterns change with the bodily movements of walking, sitting, standing, gestural movement, and so on. Equally, the Housecoat form and patterns are reshaped as it drapes upon different body types. As a digital disruptor, it operates in a dual capacity: hiding the true form of the body within the coat's interior and communicating an indistinguishable appearance. Ultimately, the objective is that the AI will fail to capture the data required as part of its surveillance capabilities.

layering in disruption

Despite these memetic qualities of the Housecoat, there is the potential jeopardy that AI could learn the silhouette pattern of its wearer over time and thus override its intent as a digital disruptor. Therefore, this project further considers how the patterns, garment structure, and materials can negate detection through the ability to metamorphosise and outwit the AI by layering materiality that has the potential to glitch the future detections of the Housecoat.



Figure 04.
The Housecoat as a Digital Disruptor, Pamela Flanagan, 2025. Illustration of the patchwork pattern applied to a housecoat pattern.

Singer and songwriter, M.I.A. launched fashion line OHMNI early in 2026, in response to 'technological warfare.'[26] OHMNI's website states it provides an armour that seeks to preserve your digital rights and autonomy. This is achieved with an engineered conductive fabric called Silver Street Sheild.[27] Woven with silver and copper threads, the skin-like fabric acts as a barrier that claims to deflect the electromagnetic signals within our daily environments such as 5G Wi-Fi. Stone Island have developed a metal-based fabric, Pure Metal Shell, used for outerwear parkas.[28] This fabric retains a structural element, moulding the fine metal mesh to the individual user's form and movements. Layered upon a textile base, the Pure Metal Shell oxidises with exposure to the climate, creating a unique aesthetic and physical form on the wearer.

The growing design research of intelligent textiles demonstrates the opportunity to embed technological components and explore speculative scenarios. Dr Jeanne Tan's AI Textiles, for instance, explore the integration of technology in fabrics for fashion and the interior [Fig. 05].[29] Tan's work incorporates illuminating optical fibres and sensors woven into the fabric, which respond to human gestures and sounds.[30] These research collaborations demonstrate the potential of textiles and technology: pattern shifting interactive knitwear, and fabrics that respond to audio, demonstrating how creative technologies with AI can have positive impacts.

Montreal-based design academic Ying Gao, who works under the pseudonym Living Pod, conceptualises the ambiguity of body and technology in the garments *Playtime* (2011) and *All Mirrors* (2024).[31] Gao describes the concept of Playtime as 'clothing transform[ed] by physical fragmentation, effectively blurring their visual aspect as if the camera were out of focus.'[32] The dress appears to be moving as if it is a living organism. The garment morphs as if it is breathing, and flickers like a firefly, concealing the body shape beneath the cocoon of voile fabric. Whereas in *All Mirrors*, robotic mirrors create undulating layers of movement upon the surface, reacting independently of the body [Fig. 06]. The garment visually articulates the duality of the gaze — being observed and being the observer at the same time. Gao describes her designs as relational interfaces for the body that are actively responding to and mediators for their environments and surveillance, in what she refers to as 'transitional spaces.'[33]



Figure 05.
AI Textiles, Jeanne Tan and Tang Hiu Ting, 2022. Image of hand touching suspended fabric that is embedded with smart digital components to react to a touch interaction. With permission from Jeanne Tan.



Figure 06.
All Mirrors, Ying Gao, 2024. Image depicts two female models wearing alternative versions of *All Mirrors*. With permission from Ying Gao. Photography by Malina Corpadean.

interstitial interior: breaking the body and data conduit

The body as a conduit to mediate between its environment and data links back to the principle of the Housecoat as a second skin and an interstitial interior. The aim of the Housecoat is to rupture the body as a conduit of data for big tech by allowing the body autonomy within the garment to gain control over what the individual choses to share and transmit while in the home.

Combining intelligent fabric interwoven with metal thread could allow the Housecoat to perform transformative characteristics and continue to disrupt surveillance. To create the shifting patterns, one can envisage a base layer fabric with the applied AI-generated patterns, which would alter via embedded sensors activated by

subtle movements of the wearer. The second layer, a malleable layer of voile interwoven with mesh components, could create a skin that stretches and compresses with the wearer, in turn disrupting surveillance [Fig. 07]. This would create two layers of pattern and form that could camouflage the body in the interior in time, allowing the wearer of the Housecoat to become chameleon-like without the risk of future detection [Fig. 08].

The Housecoat is a speculative proposition to explore how pattern within the domestic interior can be reimagined from a passive, everyday garment to being an active protector of privacy within the home. In this proposal, design performs an act of resistance, and this power can extend to other surfaces to become disruptors. Intelligent wall coverings, upholstery, lampshades, and curtains could be activated as you move from room to room, camouflaging the occupant into the interior.

In a world of increasing unregulated digital surveillance, it may become necessary to create a chamber within the interior to allow for respite. The term boudoir, which derives from the French verb *bouder*, means to sulk or be in a huff.[34] We might understand this in English terms as giving someone the silent treatment. How apt for a concept of reimagining a traditional boudoir as an anti-digital boudoir: a safe room within a room serving digital surveillance the silent treatment. The draped patterned fabric, to the interior and exterior, allows the user to partially or entirely enclose themselves in a private space as the body camouflages into the fabric chamber [Fig. 09]. The occupant can reassert their autonomy, removing their body from view as the boudoir acts like a contemporary Faraday cage, forcing optical glitches to silence the data mining by digital surveillance capitalism.



Figure 07.
AI Pattern development, Pamela Flanagan, 2025. Image depicts AI-generated pattern with mesh-like overlay to distort the visual layers.

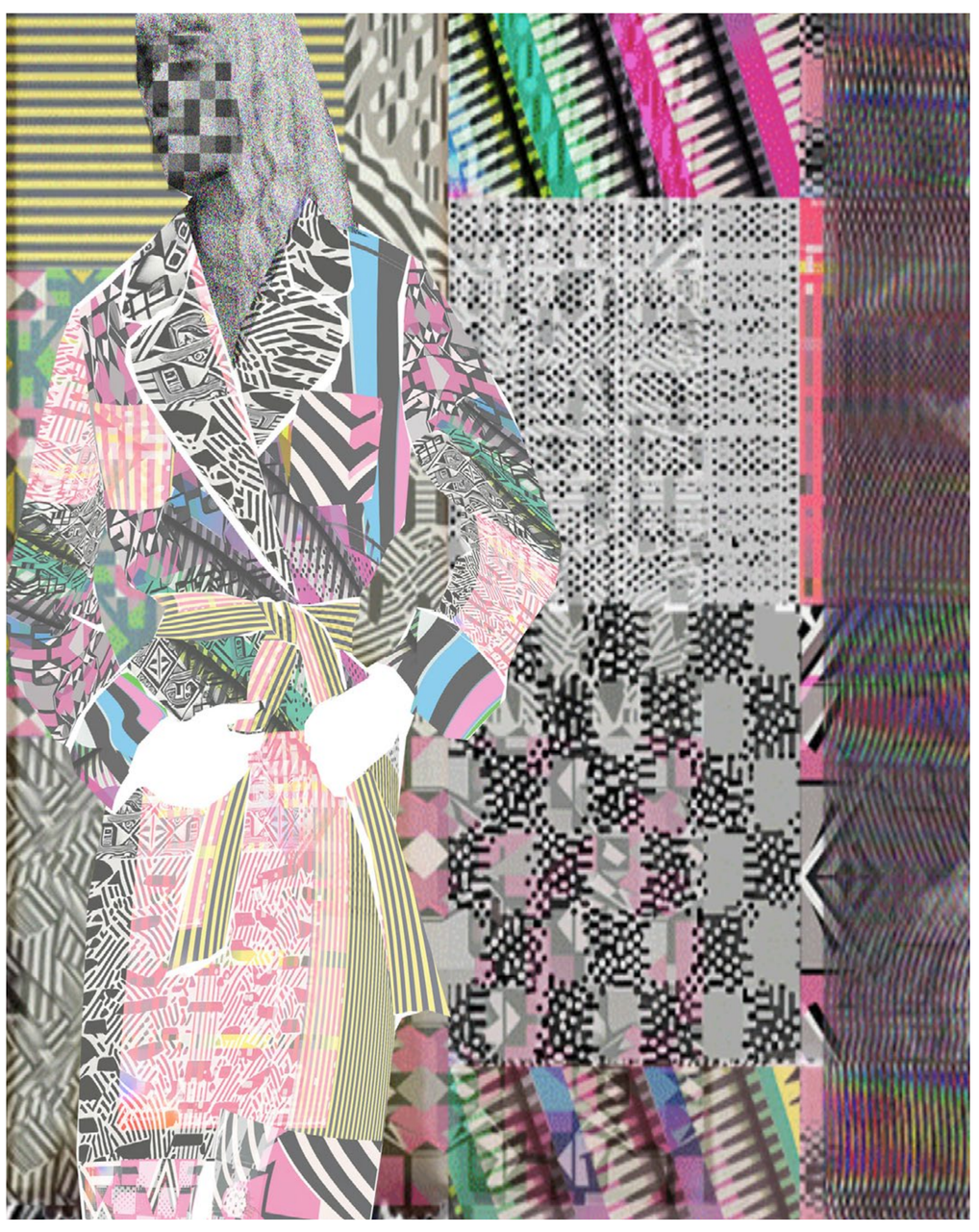


Figure 08.
The Interior as Digital Disruptor, Pamela Flanagan, 2025. Image depicts a female figure wearing the patterned Housecoat, appearing to merge with enlarged patterned backdrop.



Figure 09.
Re-imagining: A digital protection Boudoir, Pamela Flanagan, 2025. AI-generated pattern superimposed onto a eighteenth-century French Boudoir camouflaging a woman wearing the Housecoat.

conclusion

The home is no longer a purely private domain; rather, it has become increasingly politicised through the technologies embedded within it. During the nineteenth century, the home emerged as a representation of the self and of social status, a role it continues to perform today. Interiors contain memories, mementos, and personal narratives that are specific to their occupants and traditionally protected within the privacy of domestic space. However, as digital networks become intertwined with everyday life, the memory of home is no longer solely a human possession. Alongside personal memories exist *data-fied* forms of digital memory — stored as numbers, images, audio files, and behavioural records within vast networked infrastructures.

Surveillance capitalism disregards the historical distinction between public and private spheres. Technological advancement shows little sign of retreating, and our dependence on digital systems continues to grow. Orwell's *1984* offers a poignant comparison: 'The instrument (the telescreen, it was called) could be dimmed, but there was no way of shutting it off completely.'[35] This observation captures the pervasive nature of contemporary smart technologies. Connected devices now occupy our homes, and disengaging from them is increasingly difficult. While privacy settings and regulatory frameworks may offer some protection, it remains uncertain whether digital surveillance can ever be fully switched off while participating in smart living. If left unchecked, the trajectory of domestic technology risks echoing Orwell's dystopian vision, where everyday actions and conversations are continuously monitored and potentially exploited. Consequently, it is essential that individuals regain a degree of control over their domestic environments.

This research centres on how interior design might respond to the growing presence of digital surveillance within the home and whether design interventions could help restore privacy and autonomy to domestic space. Through the speculative proposition of the Housecoat, the research demonstrates that interior design can move beyond the arrangement of physical space to actively negotiate relationships between occupants, technologies, and data collection. Ultimately, society must negotiate more equitable terms of engagement with digital technologies in order to safeguard privacy and preserve autonomy within the home. The future interior designer must critically engage with emerging technologies and develop strategies that mitigate threats to privacy, whether those technologies produce beneficial or harmful consequences. In doing so, the home



Figure 10.
Big AI is Watching, Pamela Flanagan, 2025. Collage depicting the Housecoat within a home environment.

can evolve into an active site of resistance, with interior design positioned as a key discipline in challenging and subverting the growing threat to domestic privacy.

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author biography

Pamela Flanagan is Programme Leader for the BA (Hons) Interior Design programme at The Glasgow School of Art. Her research investigates the role of constructed interiors in performance, film, and television, examining how spatial environments influence narrative development, characterisation, and perceptions of fictional worlds. Prior to entering academia, she worked in practice specialising in fashion retail design.

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images between imagination and memory

Dave Loder
University of Edinburgh
0000-0001-8502-2636

Images both simulate and stimulate imaginaries. For interior design discourse, Mario Praz's magnum opus, *An Illustrated History of Interior Decoration*, proposes a history of the interior by and through images, visualising the evolution of ideals and conventions of inhabitation.[1] As a compendium, it charts the aesthetic evolution of domestic styles, yet each image is only a fragment of a more complex picture of inhabitation as described, for instance, by Witold Rybczynski's *Home: A Short History of an Idea*.[2] Praz's images project a history that is incomplete, missing what is out of view. Nonetheless, they model a reality that is virtual — an imaginary — arranging a genealogy for the home as a curated, enclosed universe, separate from the 'outside' world of the street or the factory, albeit informed by bourgeoisie aesthetics.

Images not only capture the past but also propose futures. Emblematic of a future-to-come that never quite arrived, the film *Design for Dreaming* (1956), for instance, was produced for the General Motors Motorama industry exhibition to feature the 'kitchen of the future.'[3] In the defining aesthetics of 'atomic futurism', on display is a progressive imaginary of domesticity, its high tech gadgets presented a self-cleaning and labour-saving environment, albeit one that preserves gendered norms of labour. It was situated within visions of the home in the service of an embryonic form of techno-capitalism, 'speculative scenarios where the boundary between reality and imagined future is blurred.'[4]

Such images of futures that never quite appeared are compelling. They exemplify a nostalgia and recycling of the past, which cultural theorist Mark Fisher describes as hauntology.[5] By suggesting that we have an inability to imagine new futures, he instead describes how we take comfort in images of alternative futures that co-exist with, or haunt, our present.[6] The type of 'vague fiction' proposed by the General Motors kitchen continues to be deployed in the production of imaginaries for the so-called 'smart home', but the new imaginaries have a different kind of familiarity.[7] The experience of digital domesticity is not made visible in the past exuberant fetishisation of chrome and moulded plastic, but nowadays slips invisibly into everyday objects and habits, to promise the future is already here. The digital does not reshape the home via a clumsy array of appliances but disperses domesticity across a complexity of screens and clouds — preserving the memory of home, by augmenting it.

Now roles are reversed: we do not simply look at the home; rather the home gazes back upon us. The interior itself is an imaging device, observing its inhabitants, and proposes a different type of haunting. A growing complex of devices view, sense, share, and record our movements and behaviours for inscription in digital memory. The ability to remotely observe and regulate the home from wherever we are tethered to a wi-fi signal contributes to an imaginary of the domestic that is distributed across the post/urban condition.

cite as:
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Further exacerbated by the visual consumption of the home via a plurality of screen-based experiences, exemplified by the image archiving of short-term accommodation-sharing platforms, the interior has undergone an entanglement with the lens, as one mechanism of sensing space. How we consume the interior is a matter of how it is framed, amateur or otherwise.

Within the wider context of our image-saturated society, the circumstance of the visually mediated and digitally extended interior must be repositioned. Over 5 billion digital photographs are produced each day and manifest what image theorist Sean Cubitt defines as the 'mass image', a composited picture of the world that is accumulated by a small number of global companies.[8] This all-encompassing picture becomes the primary means by which we access the world, an actualisation of Jean Baudrillard's 'hyperreal' in which reality is replaced by its image.[9] The production of the digital image matters, or materialises, the new experience of the interior.

Notwithstanding the 'instagrammable' manner in which interiors take on an algorithmic dimension, 'the terms of the mass image are entirely congruent with a circulation in which no human perception is involved.'[10] Such is the massive volume of digital images, it is impossible for them to be examined, manually, in any meaningful way. Databases are sifted to select which images and trends should receive our attention, popular or otherwise. As images circumnavigate the globe at the speed of light, they risk a greater flattening and reduction of visual culture.[11] Significantly, when reality is the image, the role of the interior — and its image — is entangled with the conditions and imaginaries propagated by algorithmic unknowability; as Michael Young describes, 'images are now modelling reality in ways that are inaccessible to humans.'[12]

Concurrent with this proliferation of the mass image, new AI generative imaging processes (GenAI) bring further troubling to the mediation, consumption, and design of the interior. While some architects and designers have embraced these new tools, a pragmatic acknowledgment of their capacity should be highlighted. Media theorist Hito Steyerl, for instance, most aptly describes GenAI as producing *mean images*, in the sense of the averaging of all consumed images to produce a statistical rendering as the output.[13] Less artificial intelligence and more 'artificial imagining', generative processes draw upon the collective memory of events that have already happened, arguably placing limitations on the production of anything 'new' but nonetheless structures a circumstance for non/human imagination. This criticism does not deny the potential for creativity expressed via GenAI. Rather, it opens the door to innovative ways of working that themselves can reveal new imaginaries. And, concurrently as these concerns arise, GenAI equally has the capacity to produce exuberant and hybrid architectural environments, as evidenced with the 'dreamscape' trend, digital interiors that exist to stimulate the algorithmic imagination.[14]

With all images produced now retained, archived on platforms, clouds, and hard drives, what will follow Praz's pictorial odyssey? To visualise a contemporary genealogy of the interior we must ask the machine to do the work, to mine the collective memory and extract what it imagines as the suitable history. It is a genealogy we all contribute to as image makers, our personal pictorial legacy allowing our memories to live on as a shared visual condition. But in this sharing, are they still ours? If we can remember lost memories, is it possible to forget? Will we still be able to imagine?

ner did it

Michelle Mantsio

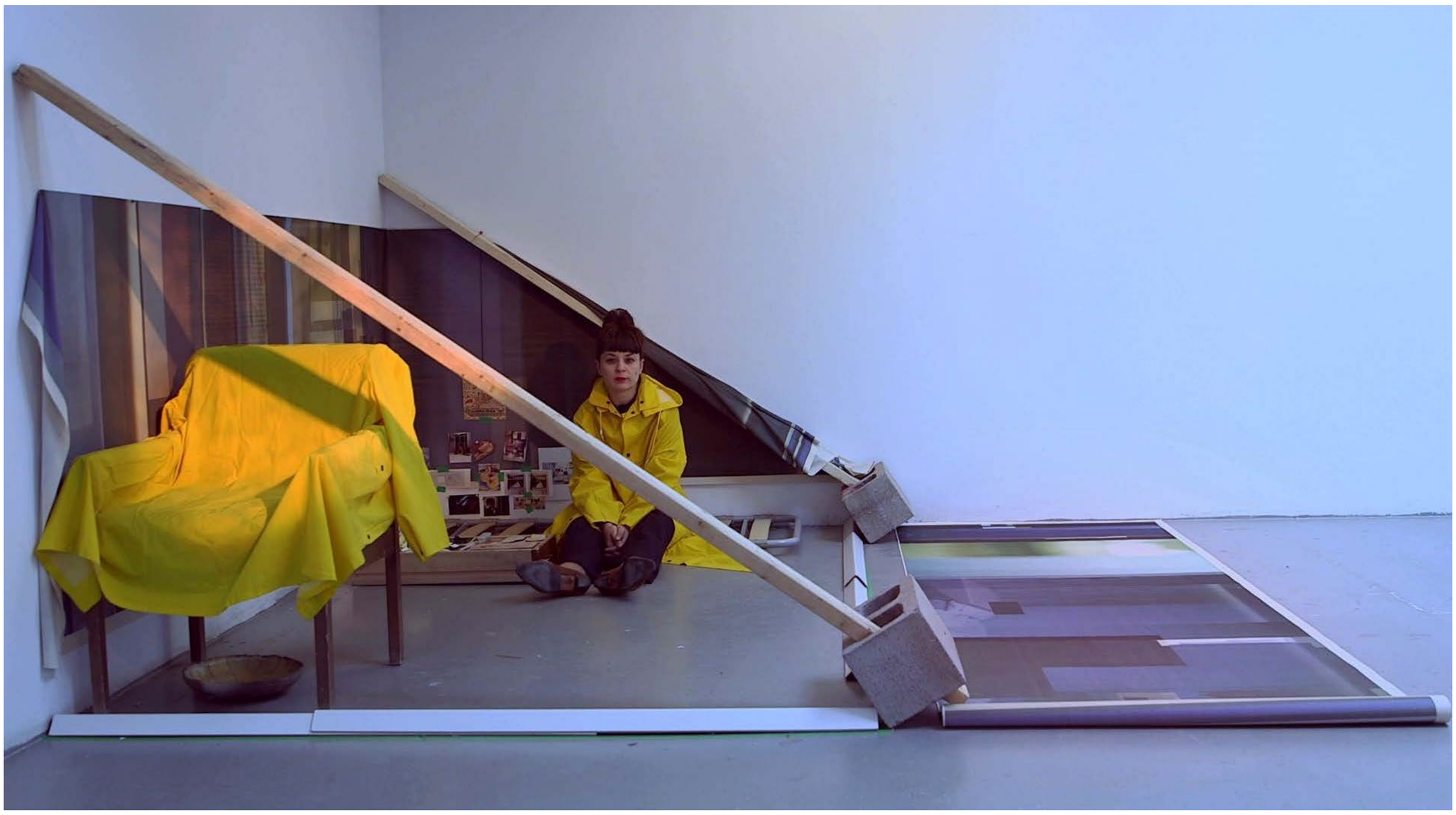

Figure 01.
Image credit Michelle Mantsio

Ner Did It is a cinematic work that explores interiority through pattern, expression, and imagination. It is a five-minute single-channel film that centres on Ner, an imaginary friend who serves as a catalyst for expansive, imaginative, and not-right practices. The film explores unfettered expression and imaginative freedom, investigating how the body might become in this improvised state — by exploring 'playacting' as a theoretical basis for the work. *Ner Did It* offers a filmic portrait of multiple selves through several evocations of inner lives and interior spaces. A spatial atmosphere of interiority is realised through creating and applying sets and a narrative voice-over. In this work, the body has the capacity to exist as singular, multiple, and mobile in uncharacteristic ways. In these expressions, the body becomes as it builds an interior experience. The film explores pattern via the use of multiple selves and repetition. It employs a visual non-linear narrative to interrogate how multiples, mimesis, and twinning can offer a scaffold to explore the improvised state via expression and imagination. In this space, the body is offered as a shadowy, unformed presence, both fully evident and ephemeral, capable of movement. This configuration is offered through the methodical building of a multi-space arrangement where the becoming body is an exploration of interiority.

spatially entangled

Madina Masimova and Yoel Langomas (Dusk Studios)

We have become accustomed to using devices like phones and computers to connect with one another. When we move away from our homes, the threads tying us to our home and family begin to loosen. We leave parts of us behind, while we carry others forward with the hope of creating a new space to call home. Such devices allow us to communicate, but they limit the complexity of our interactions. We lose our ability to hear, smell, and feel present in the places we have left.

Our thesis explores how domestic objects activate memories to distant locations. Spatially Entangled centres a personalised system that integrates customised 'memory nodes' into the user's domestic space. Based on the user's concept of home, each node is composed of an object and its associated space. Nodes evoke connections by triggering sensory, procedural, and episodic pathways that can be activated at specified times. A person can be present simultaneously in two different cities by stumbling upon a 'memory node'. This enables us to reflect on our experiences and to reposition interior and lighting design as technologies threading connections wherever we are.

The case study is done on one author living between New York and Azerbaijan. The nodes propositioned in this study are as follows:

1. Carpet node enables inhabitants' presence to manifest in one another's spaces through shifts in patterns.

2. Natural Phenomena node interacts with daylight to evoke a memory of vivid colours and shadows experienced during the sunset at home.

3. Interior lamp node is a medium bringing people together for its warmth as it recalls the memory of the open fire in Azerbaijan and represents the presence of a distant user.

4. Sound node transmits the sound of copper hammering in the mornings in Azerbaijan, while being positioned in New York, waking up the user.



Figure 02.
Image credit Masimova and Langomas

imagining interiors of memory: digital intimacy in virtual museums

Haitang Zhang



Figure 03.
Image credit Haitang Zhang

This work visualises the home in the digital era as a fragmented yet cohesive organism, a house that is at once protective and precarious. The structure is rendered as if excavated from memory: its walls are porous, its rooms exposed, and its inhabitants caught in everyday gestures of labour, intimacy, and survival. Figures climb, repair, converse, and pause within a house that seems simultaneously collapsing and regenerating, turbulent yet enduring.

The image draws on the doubleness of the interior described by Charles Rice, and reflects both an inhabitable space and an image to be contemplated.[15] Here, the home is staged not as a static container, but as a dynamic, unstable dome, echoing the tent of the nomad: always moving, absorbing relations, and reshaping itself through encounters. In this speculative vision, the domestic sphere becomes a body-machine, fleshy, fragile, and in constant negotiation. It embodies the paradox of contemporary interiors, where intimacy collides with surveillance, stability with displacement, and personal memory with collective histories.

The work imagines the home as a site of convergence: a space where multiple rhythms of life gather, where power and vulnerability intertwine, and where digital technologies reshape what it means to dwell. It is at once intimate and public, material and virtual, fractured and whole. By presenting the house in this form — open, unstable, yet resilient — the image invites viewers to reconsider the meaning of interior in a time when homes circulate as data, as image, as memory.

ai making mashup

Edward Crump



Figure 04.
Image credit Edward Crump

While the rapid evolution of visual AI remains a fluid process, making definitive conclusions difficult, it is crucial to assess its progress to understand its potential impact on design. Although OpenAI's first text-to-image model 'DALL·E' emerged in early 2021, it was not until mid-2022 — when DALL·E 2, Midjourney, and Stable Diffusion were released — that these new applications began to be recognised and feared due to their ability to create convincing imagery from text prompts, leading to questions around the future of the designer.

Rather than viewing these advancements with apprehension, I have chosen to see them as opportunities for augmentation — seeking to integrate visual AI into the design process to enhance, rather than replace, human capabilities. Presently, visual AI tools are innately shackled due to their lack of ability to connect with the tangible, physical world. Therefore, by diversifying the way we communicate them, through visual language, rather than text, it is suggested we may unlock their potential through connecting them to recognised means of conventional design practice.

Visual AI can disrupt the contemporary design workflows constrained by the need for significant effort in creating digital information up front, as it can generate complex visuals from limited information, shifting focus from conservative production to flexible ideation. Therefore, it makes sense to work in ways that reflect this, focusing on how quickly an idea can be visually communicated, iterated, and explored. Utilising Visual AI in this approach would allow it to act as an accelerant in early-stage design and encourages the re-promotion of analogue craft within contemporary design workflows, due to the enhanced ability to translate ideas between digital and analogue space. This image evidences my experimentation in this area, seeking to explore how visual AI has the potential to rekindle a closer bond between the human hand and the built form, through using sketch models as inputs.

unreliable narrators: subjective spaces or home is never as we remember it

Béatrice Frant

Memory skews space. And when space endures a re-visit, perception changes. Past intangible echoes force the reconstruction using only imagination, which is why the intricacies lie in revisiting those mythical rooms. Most often, childhood shoes you once looked down on, awaiting your mother's food at the dinner table, are now tight with the realisation that they can no longer contain the size of an adult foot.

The work explores the duality of interiors as spaces remembered, where senses fill the forgotten visual gaps. While investigating autobiographical issues of domestic inhabitation as a woman, the memory of kitchens stood out in its distinctive correspondence to emotion, often unrelated to any aesthetic qualities. I thus aim to capture the specific feeling of food-centric areas in two different instances during my own time. First, the childhood kitchen: mostly reliant on spatial recollection, which blurs the threshold between real and experienced, it brings sand on the floor and the waves as windows. The actual distance between apartment and sea is not indicated, nor remembered. Below, the professional kitchen focuses on practicality, rush, and choreographed movements as captured in the mechanical system. It plays upon fragility (glasses balanced on a spinning top and the human-sized hole to the bar-back) and constriction. The use of inflatable elements showcases dysmorphic issues that arise after eating.

Ordinary kitchens contain an immense amount of habitual information where there is no need for previous exposure or understanding. We find it innate to fully engage with food preparation.

This critical and fictional lens of the design exercise allows an expansion of semi-autobiographical details seen from the perspective of both user and admirer. The experiential quality opens up the alter-ego dimension. It then asks whether the relationship with food, gradually limited by societal expectations or eating disorders, might influence the architectural recollection.



Figure 05.
Image credit Béatrice Frant

designing for grief and awe: sublime-informed interior design strategies in philippine funerarias to complement bereavement management

Jamieson Tan

Philippine funeral practices are grounded in Indigenous traditions yet shaped by centuries of Spanish, American, and Chinese influence.[16] While home funerals persist in rural communities, urban centres such as Manila increasingly rely on funeral homes, or funerarias.[17] Despite their central role in bereavement, these spaces have seen little architectural or interior design innovation for more than a century, often neglecting their psychological and cultural significance. Architecture and interior design extend beyond functional concerns to influence phenomenological and emotional experience.[18] Within ritual spaces, design mediates memory, identity, and collective meaning. Aesthetic principles of the sublime, particularly its capacity to elicit awe, offer an important lens for reimagining funeraria interiors as environments that can both honour cultural values and support grief management.[19]

Through Qualitative Content Analysis of sixty-six multidisciplinary sources, five Sublime themes — Vastness, Threat, Mystery, Infinity, and Transcendence — were identified as adaptable to interior design. Complementary studies involving twenty-nine respondents and ten interviewees further revealed Filipinos' strong sensitivities towards Transcendence, Mystery, and Infinity. Respondents further emphasised the importance of integrating Transcendence, Infinity, and Vastness in funeraria spaces, associating them with more meaningful grief experiences.

These findings informed the conceptual design of a chapel interior. Curved walls, consistent materials, and natural light reduce distraction and foster unity, while a centripetal layout focuses attention inward. A marble plinth beneath ethereal clerestory light and a brass chandelier anchors the casket in a setting that emphasises transcendence. White walls, functioning as projection surfaces for panoramic tributes, replace ornamentation with spatial clarity, while minimalist detailing amplifies the themes of infinity and vastness. Collectively, the design reconceptualises the funeraria as a transformative environment where architecture mediates loss, nurtures healing, and reaffirms cultural continuity.

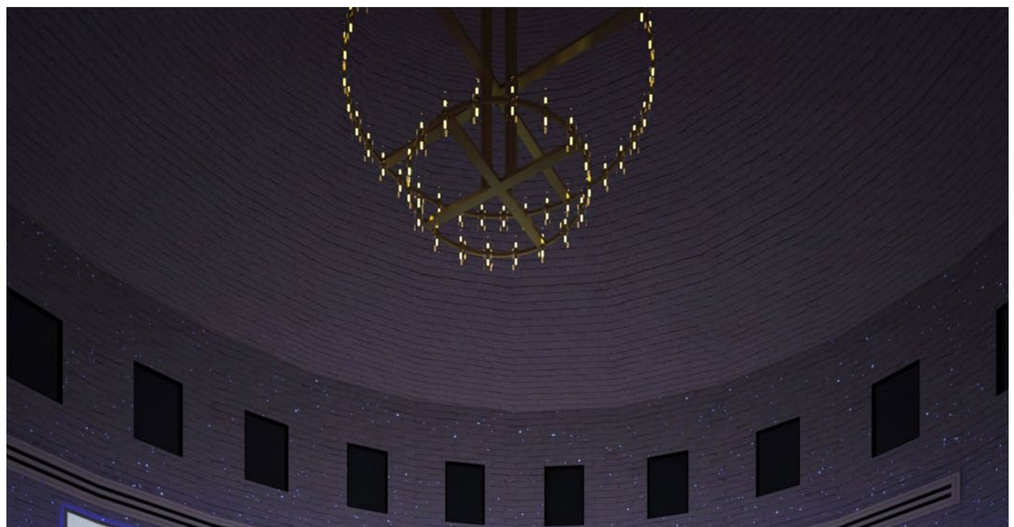

Figure 06.
Image credit Jamieson Tan

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author biographies

Dave Loder
University of Edinburgh
0000-0001-8502-2636
Dave Loder is Programme Director for MA Interior, Architectural & Spatial Design at Edinburgh College of Art where he also convenes the Image|Imaging|Interior research cluster. His research focuses on the mediation of the interior via image-based technologies, with a particular focus on domesticity.

Michelle Mantsio
RMIT University
0000-0003-1591-4780
Michelle Mantsio lectures in the Bachelor of Interior Design (Hons) at RMIT University. She explores intersections of body, pattern and the improvised state through multi-level assemblages.

Madina Masimova
Parsons School of Design
0009-0002-1921-7835

Yoel Langomas
Parsons School of Design
0009-0002-6292-8018
Madina Masimova and Yoel Langomas are spatial designers. They practise interior and lighting design, combining hand craft with advanced technologies, science with sculpture.

Haitang Zhang
Glasgow School of Art
0000-0002-0020-1772
Haitang Zhang is a doctoral researcher in design studies based at the Glasgow School of Art, focusing on virtual museums and digital heritage within the digital humanities.

Edward Crump
Kingston University
0009-0006-7897-4931
Edward Crump is a Lecturer on the BA (Hons) Interior Design course at the Kingston School of Art, a researcher into the application of AI in design, and a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

Béatrice Frant
University of Westminster
0009-0001-7054-6223
Béatrice Frant is a graduate from the Bartlett School of Architecture with a keen interest in domestic alienation. Her work has won several awards, most recently the Fitzroy-Robinson Drawing Prize.

Jamieson Tan
University of Santo Tomas
0009-0000-6181-5252
Jamieson Tan is a former physiotherapist. He has been an interior designer for the past twenty years and has been teaching for seven years. In 2021, he earned his master's degree in interior design.

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this voice; this life; this procession: sensorial journeys and entanglements with lidar and kinect in virginia woolf's writing room

Brass Art:

Chara Lewis
Manchester Metropolitan University
0000-0002-4119-2817

Kristin Mojsiewicz
University of Edinburgh
0000-0001-8696-2216

Anneké Pettican
University of Huddersfield
0000-0003-4792-7199

abstract

This essay positions Virginia Woolf's writing room in the grounds of Monk's House, Rodmell, as an affective spatial threshold, upon which we examine literary architectures, temporality, and worlding. Adopting Woolf's writing methods as an artistic approach to working with light-capture, we explore LiDAR and Kinect as two different forms of non-invasive scanning technology, revealing the multiple, fragmented versions of reality that her literary works imagined.

Situating the immersive video and soundscape *this voice; this life; this procession* in a genealogy of optical and non-optical practices, we attend to the strange overlap between early cinematic perceptions of interiority, and contemporary non-optical technologies that measure and record data. Adopting this apparatus, we use performance, mirrors, and duration to disrupt, enhance, and translate their inherent qualities, which reveal the tactile intensity of data.

In *this voice* the 'sensing body' moves through the windows of Woolf's home as the digital data-layers of her garden and writing room are peeled open. We explore how, through the dissonant relations of different data sets, the fluid journeying of our virtual cameras is disturbed, first by the effects of sinking, tunnelling, and surfacing, and second, by the irruption of lower quality Kinect data. We direct these in ways that align to Woolf's writing methods — pitching tempo and direction in opposition — and discuss this in relation to patterns and chronotopes of time in her novels.

Throughout, we connect the concerns of our practice, as crystalised in this artwork, to broader contextualisation of Woolf's work: worlding, multiplicities, the post-human landscape, literary cartographies, and the theories and registers of visible and invisible light.

keywords

Woolf; LiDAR; Kinect; spatio-temporal; interior

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pilgrimages | thresholds

The immersive video and soundscape *this voice; this life; this procession* (2024) emerged through our long-term engagement with light as a material, a shared interest in Virginia Woolf's writing, and the potential of light-based capture to affectively 'record' and 'translate' heritage spaces with deep literary resonances.[1] This work is situated within moving image practices, spatial non-invasive technologies, and an engagement with heritage or museological sites. This means that in writing through our approach to the interior of Virginia Woolf's writing room we move between literary and art criticism, touching on film theory, architectural writings, and aspects of new media archaeology, through the lens of Woolf's own writing, which has relevance to new materialist approaches. First and foremost, this is an artistic project.

Working with two very different forms of light-based scanning and capture technologies in the grounds of Monk's House, Rodmell, our attention was focused on Woolf's writing room where all her major works from 1922 onwards took form. Through an examination of her writing space as threshold, we situate this immersive work and Woolf's writing in relation to the registers of visible and invisible light, worlding and the threshold as an irruption in the transmission of fluid, spatial journeys. The artwork invites audiences to visualise aspects of the multiple, fragmented versions of reality and time that Woolf herself articulated. As the 'sensing' body of the virtual camera moves through the windows of Woolf's home, the digital data-layers of her garden and writing room are peeled open [Fig. 01]. Through adopting her creative approach to being-in-the-world (streams of consciousness, atemporality, and defamiliarisation), we reveal — using Woolf's words — the 'gradual dissolution of everything.'[2]

The permission to be in a significant interior space occupied by the author has become an important, extended collaborative aspect of our practice. To have the time to think through the dimensions and bearings of a space with the 'felt' presence of our three bodies, and to deliberately act and perform on site using responsive methods, recognises an invisible impetus that propels the work and the connections we make and bring. Through our research trips and work at the Brontë Parsonage, Freud's London home, and Woolf's house at Rodmell, we are highly attuned to the desire-laden literary pilgrimage as part of an authentic experience. However, as Joanna Biggs writes in *A Life of One's Own*, after visiting Rodmell, 'I was in the place where she [Woolf] wrote and I felt as far away from her as ever.'[3]

Biggs's feeling may have been induced by the usual public experience of encountering Woolf's space through a viewing window. We (Brass Art) were permitted by the National Trust to scan inside Virginia Woolf's intimate, creative space and the surrounding garden, using non-invasive light-based laser technologies more familiar to haptic gaming and architectural practices. Through the invisible, reflected light of the Kinect on-range sensors and LiDAR scanner, we carefully explored and occasionally disrupted the interior and exterior spaces using mirrors, performance, and extended duration to generate different forms of time-based cloud data. Acknowledging the challenges for artists working in heritage sites, our captured performances,

> playfully co-ordinate the documented and imagined significance of spaces within a museological context, drawing them into differential relation with what is known about the individuals who were resident within their walls, the contents of their writings, and both the documented and imagined significance of selected items from curated collections.[4]

architectures | affect

Many writers, artists, and architects have focused on the metaphors Woolf herself used about both constructing and reading books, and these are useful to reflect upon for our project. In *A Room*



Figure 01.
this voice; this life; this procession, 2024. Video still. Courtesy of Brass Art.

of One's Own, she claims that, for her, 'a book is not made from sentences laid end to end, but of sentences built, if an image helps, into arcades or domes.'[5] The Woolfs remodelled Monk's House extensively and repeatedly. Victoria Rosner asks what that process of re-making might mean for understanding Woolf's creative process and endless deferrals of meaning — 'If books could be buildings, she was their literary architect; if buildings could be texts, she made herself both their author and their interpreter.'[6] Considering her approach to the use of spatial and architectural frameworks in her narrative structures, we find alignment most clearly on the concept of thresholds. In his discussion of negative space, Allan Johnson reminds us that the second line of *Mrs Dalloway* is both structural and symbolic: 'The doors would be taken off their hinges.'[7] For us, this immediately presents the image of an architectural schematic, opening the building up to exploration, direction, and the flow of bodies, gestures, and objects. The fortress of the patriarchal Victorian home is exploded by Clarissa Dalloway's first two actions in the book of buying the flowers (herself) and requiring the doors to be removed (for the party). This permeability of buildings then, through vertical and horizontal axes, has a direct relationship to our exploration and excavation of Woolf's writing room. We strategically use doorways and mirrors to act as portals to other temporal realities, and to enable a filmic transition to another 'action' and elsewhere, using lasers as film cameras. Johnson also foregrounds 'the affective possibilities of negative architectural space — that is, thresholds, portals, and vast interior voids — in Virginia Woolf's writing.'[8]

In assembling *this voice* we inserted performances, captured previously at the Brontë Parsonage and Freud's London home, into Woolf's writing room. The artists' pixelated monochrome bodies perform within the coloured data clouds of another place and time, through a-temporal dispersal. Although these intimate and original interior contexts are not legible to an audience unfamiliar with our *Shadow Worlds* | *Writers'*

Rooms project, for us they conceptually string together a multiplicity of fluid perspectives at any one time. Situating the concerns of our artistic practice within the tensions of a museological context, Patricia Allmer insists,

> What your work does for me is, it really takes apart — literally it starts to fall apart — this whole myth around presence and it becomes very permeable, and actually what you show very clearly is the absence; of not being able to capture any of this presence.[9]



Figure 02.
Process image, Monk's House, Rodmell, 2018. Photograph. Courtesy of Brass Art.

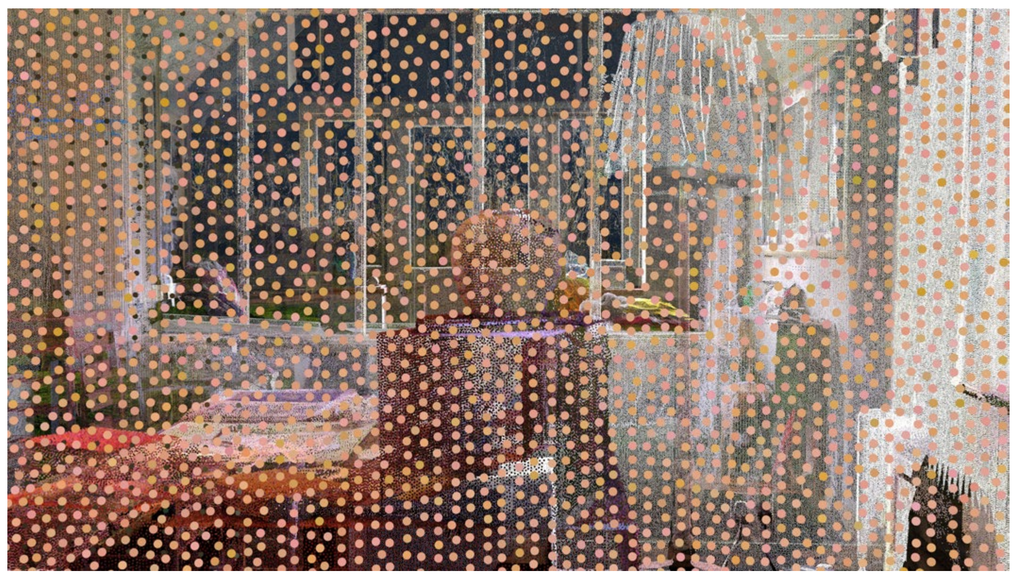

Figure 03.
this voice; this life; this procession, 2024. Video still. Courtesy of Brass Art.

Approaching Woolf's writing room in real life, the visitor first enters an annexe [Fig. 02]. In front of them a large viewing window offers a portal into the original wooden shed and the writing desk at its centre, presented as if Woolf herself has just downed tools and left the room, as Biggs experienced. The desire to step across the threshold between one spatial and temporal condition into another is frustrated in order to conserve both the artefacts and a sense of her continued, and simultaneously arrested, presence. In *this voice* spatial thresholds are traversed in ways architecturally unconventional and humanly impossible. For example, our virtual camera ascends and descends through the branches of trees, it rises from under the church graveyard to approach the writing room from below [Fig. 01], it views her desk from the roof shingles above [Fig. 07] and below [Fig. 08], and, in a reverse tunnelling or burrowing, the viewer is pulled through the membrane of pixels as the camera retreats from the shed into the darkness of the garden [Fig. 03].

Directing the virtual camera, we deliberately foregrounded the visual disorientation of being beneath or above a permeable surface and then passing through that fundamental threshold. This movement from external to internal, of passing through the glass of a greenhouse, the flint garden walls, the sessile linden tree, or to breach the writing room itself, speaks of Woolf's deep sense of time and worlding. The slower movements in the work allow space, breath, and anticipation while the quickening tempos, invoked as thresholds, are punctuated by the camera and draw attention through a rushing or bursting in. This fluid journeying of the camera is interrupted in two ways — first where the camera is dragged rather than plotted through the point-cloud data, and second by the introduction of lower quality Kinect data, in which the captured artist performances disturb the spatial context [Fig. 04]. These interjections of motion capture bring in our performing bodies as apparitions, partially apprehended as shell-like forms that reveal the hollowness of their carapace and revel in an impish haunting of this other space, turning, kicking, and dancing, or hiding beneath Woolf's desk.



Figure 04.
this voice; this life; this procession, 2024. Video still. Courtesy of Brass Art.

The void beneath her desk seemed to offer itself as a space we could occupy. The desk is the central feature in a room already full of artefacts carefully placed as if she had just left, or in anticipation of a summer soirée (doubling as storage for deck chairs and boules). Exploring this negative space with our bodies and documenting our presence with Kinect scanners felt like a suitably transgressive act. This occupation was redolent of the nursery experience Woolf references and wrestles with in *Sketch of the Past*, imagining her infant world-building beneath a different table — 'Looking back [...] I cannot recover the proportions of the external world — how large for instance was the space beneath the nursery table.'[10]

temporality | worlding

It is impossible to do justice to Woolf's radical approach to writing about, through, and with time in short form. Jean Mills acknowledges the reader's disorientation within her worlding, stating that 'Time bends and transcends in a Woolf text.'[11] In her writing we often encounter a singular experience of perception through multiple temporalities. This resonates with the modernist temporal concepts affected by mobility and time-space compression: first, by analogy to Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity of time as a flow rather than an absolute; second, of each individual experiencing time according to their own internal clock; and third — to different observers moving at different speeds relative to each other — time flows at different rates.[12] Among Woolf's many writing methods, some are particularly pertinent for our working within a heritage or museum context: structures of temporality (harlequinade); diurnal cycles (day); narrative time (tunnelling); interior time (stream of consciousness); and circular time (female time). Although literary critics are in agreement that Woolf does not equate the landscape with the female form, her writing does reveal cyclical and circular female modes of time, partially through what Rachel Bowlby describes as 'discontinuous temporalities of the various characters and the double time which they live.'[13] These temporal themes pattern our work as artists.

In her autobiographical *Sketch of the Past*, Woolf recognises 'that the whole world is a work of art' — a pattern.[14] She also defines the relationship between being and non-being, as well as acknowledging how childhood observations led her to appreciate the inter-connectedness of all things, the leakiness of boundaries, and the porosity of matter. Recognising these connections in *The Waves*, as 'circuits of vibration', Carrie Rohman paraphrases Elizabeth Grosz's description of these refrains as 'transmuted and transferred from cosmos to earth, from animal to animal, from animal to human and back, etc.'[15] Rohman continues that these refrains 'oscillate between the living and the cosmic, that open life onto excess and the artistic.'[16]

Sierra Senzaki connects Woolf's writing to new materialist theory and the relations between humans and their entangled connections with a shared environment. She defines non-human moments of being as operating 'upon the same rhizomatic logic, the same removal of distance and hierarchy to reveal that we exist in companionate relation to others as members of the same ecosystem or actants in the same assemblage.'[17] In Woolf's articulation of the inter-connectedness between all things, the tactile, sensing body is open to atmospheric and atomistic conditions: 'The quality of the air above Talland House seemed to suspend sound, to let it sink down slowly, as if it were caught in a blue gummy veil.'[18]

This sense of worlding and the 'myriad material connections between the human and their surroundings' is excavated through our decision to capture not only the writing room as originally intended but also the whole scene, partial house, expansive garden, and, unexpectedly, the neighbouring churchyard.[19] This is vital to a reading of *this voice*. In our appreciation of the laser's touch, and through our interpretation and manipulation, the human and the more-than-human have been enmeshed by the permeability of the point cloud. The data is visualised through prismatic dots; the camera 'sees' or reveals the human-made through the natural and vice versa, and our bodies' data is integrated into that vital flow. Having arrived in Rodmell with the intention of scanning ourselves and the situated writing room, we found instead that the operational processes had captured a milieu of temporal, physical, natural, and human-made things as accidental actors in a much wider *mise-en-scene*.

We have described the effect of the slow-moving camera appearing to register the whole scene from beneath the surface, noting that 'peripheral forms come into view and form unexpected and significant relationships. Within this earthly "critical zone" of organic matter, roots, rock and water, the humus — invisible to the laser — signals the entanglement of all things.'[20] Woolf herself poetically articulates this entanglement in *In the Orchard*:

> The uprush of the trees was tied down by these movements; the whole was compacted by the orchard walls. For miles beneath the earth was clamped together;

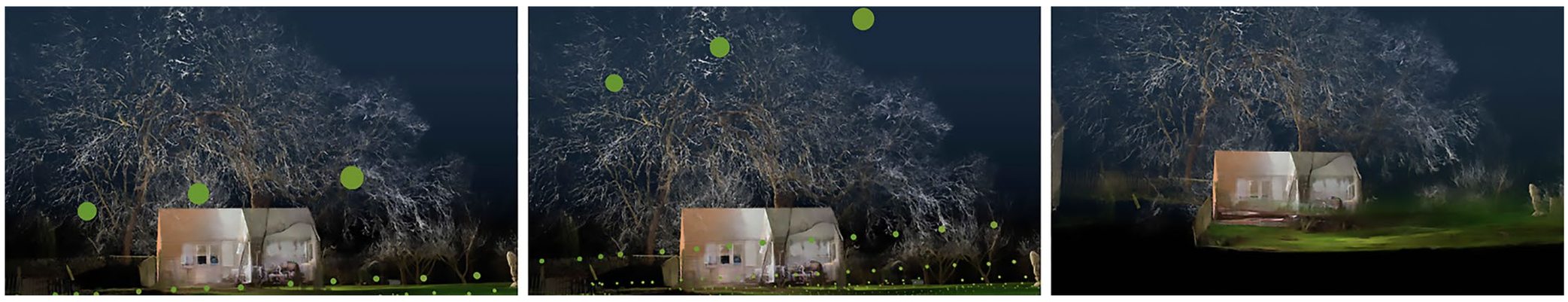

Figure 05.
this voice; this life; this procession, 2024. Video still sequence. Courtesy of Brass Art.

> rippled on the surface with wavering air; and across the corner of the orchard the blue-green was slit by a purple streak.[21]

intensities | flashes

Our collective responses to Woolf's writings centre on the ways in which she writes through visual or tactile intensities, long durational flows of time, quick flashes of images or sound or temperature, and a scrutiny of the atmospheric particularities and complexities of interior lives in dialogue with the conditions of modernity. In *Sketch of the Past* Woolf recalls,

> The little platform of present time on which I stand is, so far as the weather is concerned, damp and chilly. I look up [...] I look up and see, as if reflecting it, a sky the colour of dirty water. And the inner landscape is much of a piece.[22]

The spatial and temporal infrastructures of Woolf's writing appeal to our sensibilities — a novel contained within the parameters of a single day; the Great War occurring in parenthesis; the imagined deep-time flow of a collection of object-detritus. These narrative limits propose a visualisation of time and space interacting (in the novel), which can thus be mapped and, crucially, re-read. We returned to Mikhail Bakhtin's literary proposition that space responds to narrative, just as narrative responds to its spatial conditions and imagination — '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.'[23]

Maggie Humm notes that 'much of the narrative weight of the novel is sustained in images which act as visual analogues to plot developments.'[24] Woolf herself drew her plan for the 1927 novel *To the Lighthouse* as two blocks interconnected by a narrow channel: a day — [10 years] — a day, which could also be read as two burrows connected by a tunnel. Robert Talley writing on Literary Cartographies, proposes that 'map-making is what narratives do: they are "mapping machines"'.[25] Meanwhile architect Andrew Carr's chronotopes map the different characters, locations, and temporalities in Woolf's novels — attempting to plot the conflicting tempos, motifs, connections of thought, and specific threshold moments in the text, which look backwards as well as forwards. In Carr's chronotope of *To the Lighthouse* he visualises a window, a knitted brown stocking, a lost brooch, an easel, a boat, the lighthouse, the cycles of the moon, the span of time and weather conditions, alongside Woolf's phrases anchored in the book's chronology [Fig. 06]. Carr concludes that,

> Small, incidental moments, such as moving across a room, knitting a stocking or cutting pictures from a magazine form physical notches for interior monologues that wander from viewpoint to viewpoint, recalling past events and projecting imaginary futures, from multiple perspectives. Each excursion occupies a disproportionate duration compared to the external time frame that holds it.[26]

The visual repetition and echo of these symbols lay bare the patterns and tempos like a performance score; the black dots representing each character's occurrence in the text appear like perforated lines or code. The symbols slip from small gesture to lunar cycle or weather front, to a moment of introspection and interiority. Finally, the eye is drawn to the bottom right of the page and to the line from the book, 'it was done, it was finished.'[27] This translation of book into graphic form both obscures and reveals aspects of its own condition, and questions how to present the temporality of reading narrative, in the process of reading the chronotope.

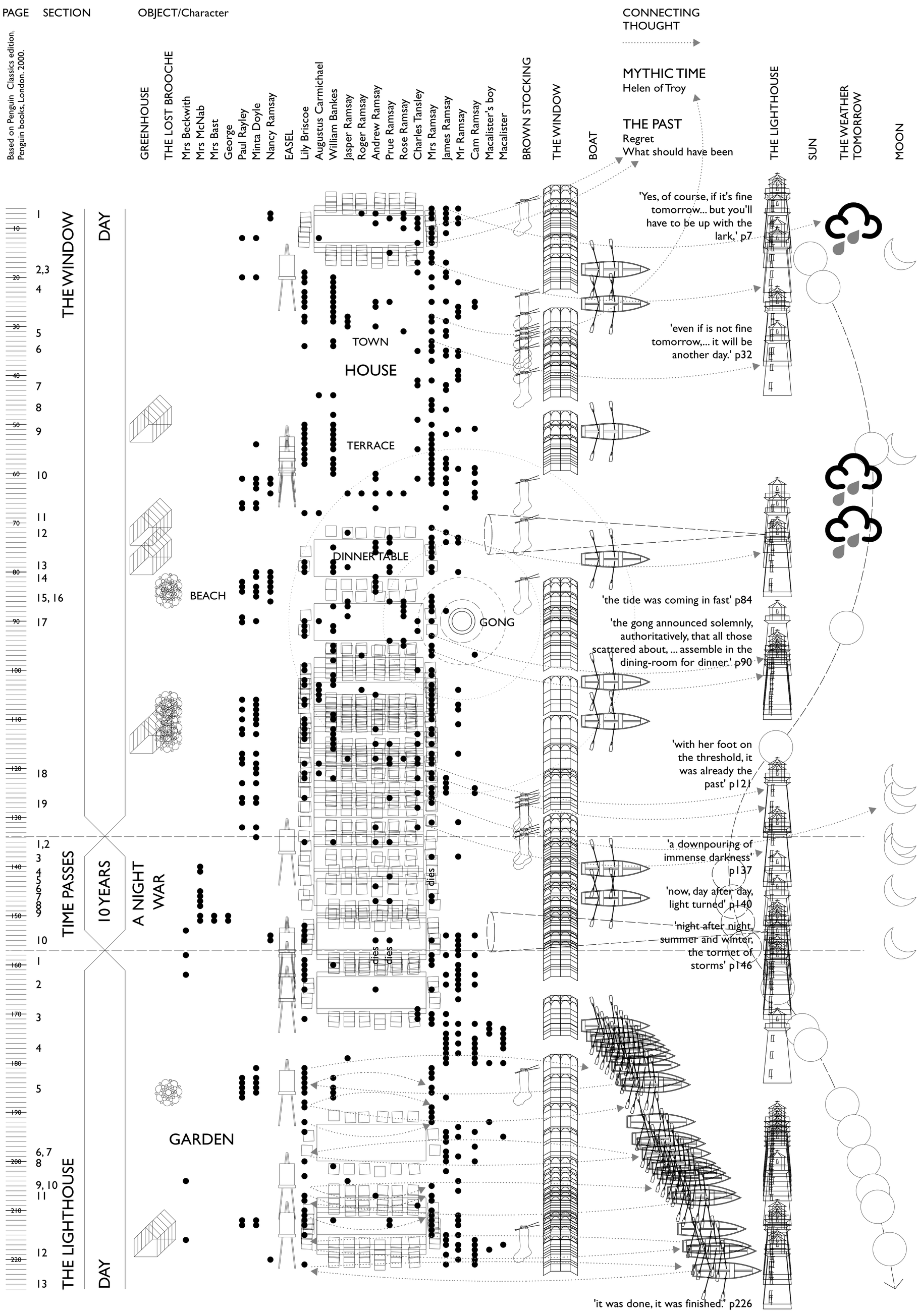

Figure 06.
01 To the Lighthouse. Andrew Carr, 2023. Diagram. Courtesy of the artist.

prismatic | luminous

The temporal cycle is clearly visible in *this voice* — the saturation of the grass and glow of the shed were captured at the brightest point of the day, whereas purple hues signal the low light conditions towards the end of the day — and at moments in the film when this is all simultaneously visible, it has an intensely prismatic effect. Noting how Woolf uses the violet end of the spectrum to signal a return to shadowy invisibility in *The Waves* (1931), J. F. Stewart claims, 'Color [sic] in the novel is not only an equivalent of feeling, it is also a component of form. The variously tinted streams of consciousness interconnect, so that "geometric colour" becomes a structural principal.'[28] Other Woolf scholars such as Jane Goldman draw attention to the use of photological metaphors in her descriptions of characters and interiors, how patriarchal shadowing is represented in moments of chiaroscuro.[29] Stewart continues that Woolf's art 'advances from fragmentary impressionism of Jacob's Room to the luminous structure of the Lighthouse. There revolving lights and colors [sic] play on the sensibility like light waves on the retina.'[30]

We have had countless moments of reading Woolf's short stories post-production and finding incredible resonances between her description of looking through, and moving from, exterior to interior and vice versa; looking deeply at dark, merging objects and shadowy occlusions. In the posthumously-published short story *The Moment: Summer's Night*, Woolf presents this crepuscular setting that speaks strongly to the 'strange, diaphanous scanned quality of light' in our film:[31]

> But this moment is also composed of a sense that the legs of the chair are sinking through the centre of the earth, passing through the rich garden earth; they sink, weighted down. Then the sky loses its colour perceptibly and a star here and there makes a point of light. Then changes, unseen in the day, coming in succession seem to make an

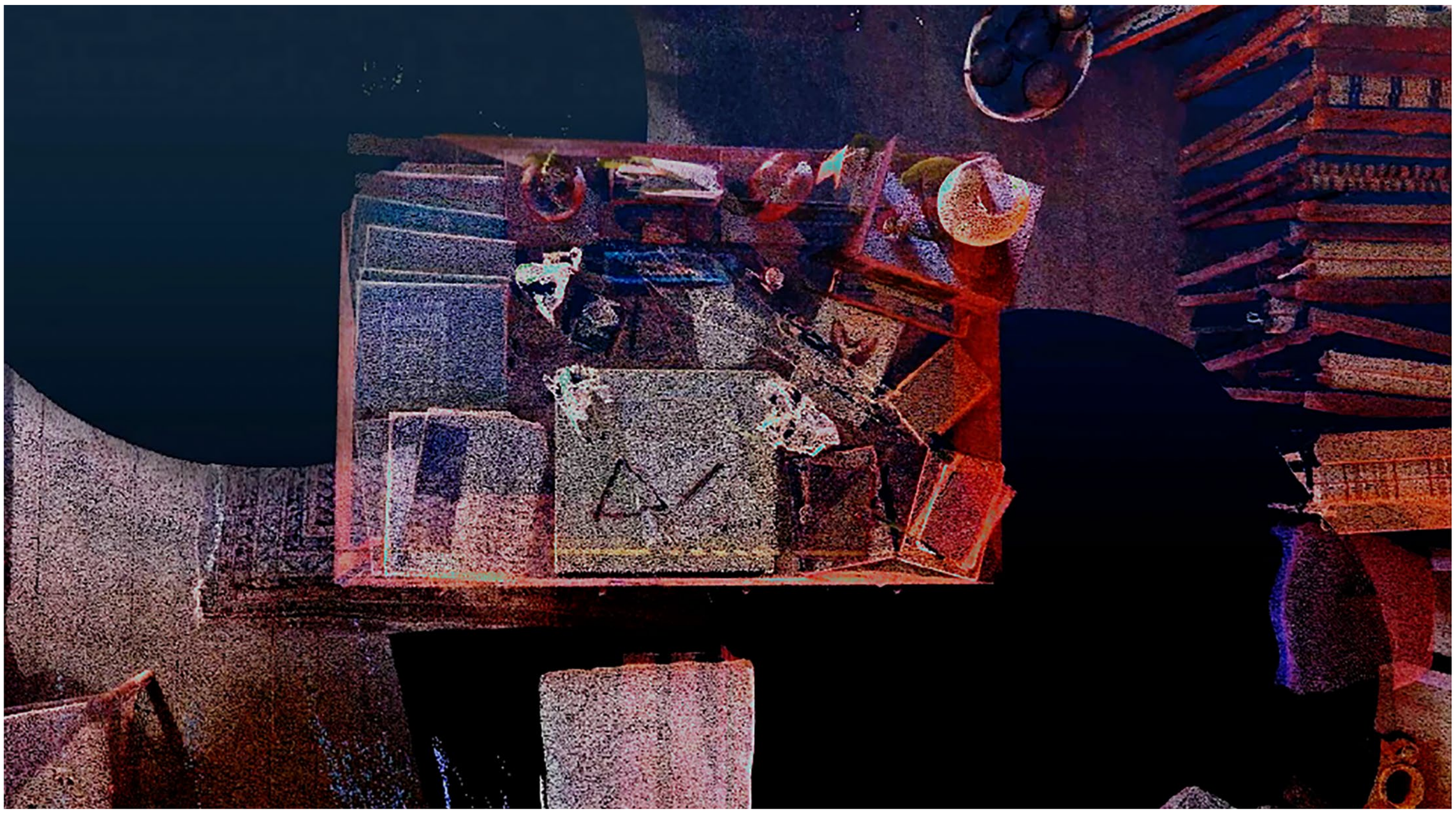

Figure 07.
this voice; this life; this procession, 2024. Video still. Courtesy of Brass Art.

order evident. One becomes aware that we are spectators and also passive participants in a pageant. And as nothing can interfere with the order, we have nothing to do but accept, and watch.[32]

These moments foreground the importance of intensity and sensation in Woolf's writing. Architect Marko Jobst claims that '[these] extreme perceptual renderings lead to radical transformations of what is seen, moving beyond what is known of the object and enabling the merging of various objects.'[33] For us this suggests what Woolf's methods might offer to our art practice, and to writing about both site and architecture. Such moments, where shadows congeal to produce unrecognisable forms, haunt our work with scanners. For the unsuspecting viewer, the scanner's veridical capture creates new psychodramatic amalgamations, from occlusions and mergings, to absorb and apprehend. Allmer returns to the theme of writing through space and with data, noting in our work that 'data here as an artistic tool also sets a fascinating counterpoint to writing, and specifically to the manual act of writing.'[34]

over-seeing | signals

The literary techniques of Woolf and fellow modernist writers were notably cinematic in light of emergent editing techniques such as montage, the close up, flashback, and fadeouts, which explored the potentials and intensities of the medium at the time.[35] *This voice* proposes that Woolf draws attention to a problem of objective representation that typically forms technological modes of representation, as though questioning the value of a photographic indexicality that cannot in some way also index memory, imagination, and subjective, internal life. Our initial Kinect moving-image work, employing the relatively crude motion capture capabilities of early Kinect sensors, is described as 'machinimatic expressionism' by Spencer Roberts. He notes an overlap with the cinematic expressionism of F. W. Murnau's film *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, that 'the encounter with each of these technologies in their appropriate temporal milieu, provided access to a machinic way of seeing that was highly affective in character, being generative of a certain degree of awe, and wonder, seeming to merge the mathematical and the dynamic sublime.'[36]

There is an aesthetic affinity here with Woolf's own writing on the affect of early cinematic viewing, producing highly charged psychological spaces. Specifically, Woolf describes a moment of fear seeing a black shape bulging at the edge of the screen during a screening of Murnau's 1920 film:

> It swelled to an immense size, quivered, bulged and sank back again into nonentity. For a moment it seemed to embody some monstrous diseased imagination of the lunatic's brain. For a moment it seemed as if thought could be conveyed by shape more effectively than by words.[37]

This rupture, for Woolf, signals the potential for cinema to show thought or emotional intensity beyond superficial, representational shorthand, in order to do some of the interior work that novels already performed.

Although Humm states that 'Woolf's modernism is in urgent dialogue with the technologies of modernity – cinema and photography,'[38] we are also interested in the archaeologies of the non-optical laser-scanners central to our practice. Jussi Parikka's genealogy of experimental techniques for measurement describes making visible what is not immediately apparent to the naked eye — 'detecting data from the wavelengths and other realms through extended practices of light.'[39] We are attentive to these extended practices through our use and misuse of interior (Kinect) and exterior (LiDAR) scanning devices. Their emergent histories, failures, glitches, pulses, and blind spots materialise through a discourse rooted in visual culture. It still speaks to the apparatus of photography and film — through signals, flashes, sensors, and sound — despite the roots, and continued development, of the technology for military surveillance purposes.

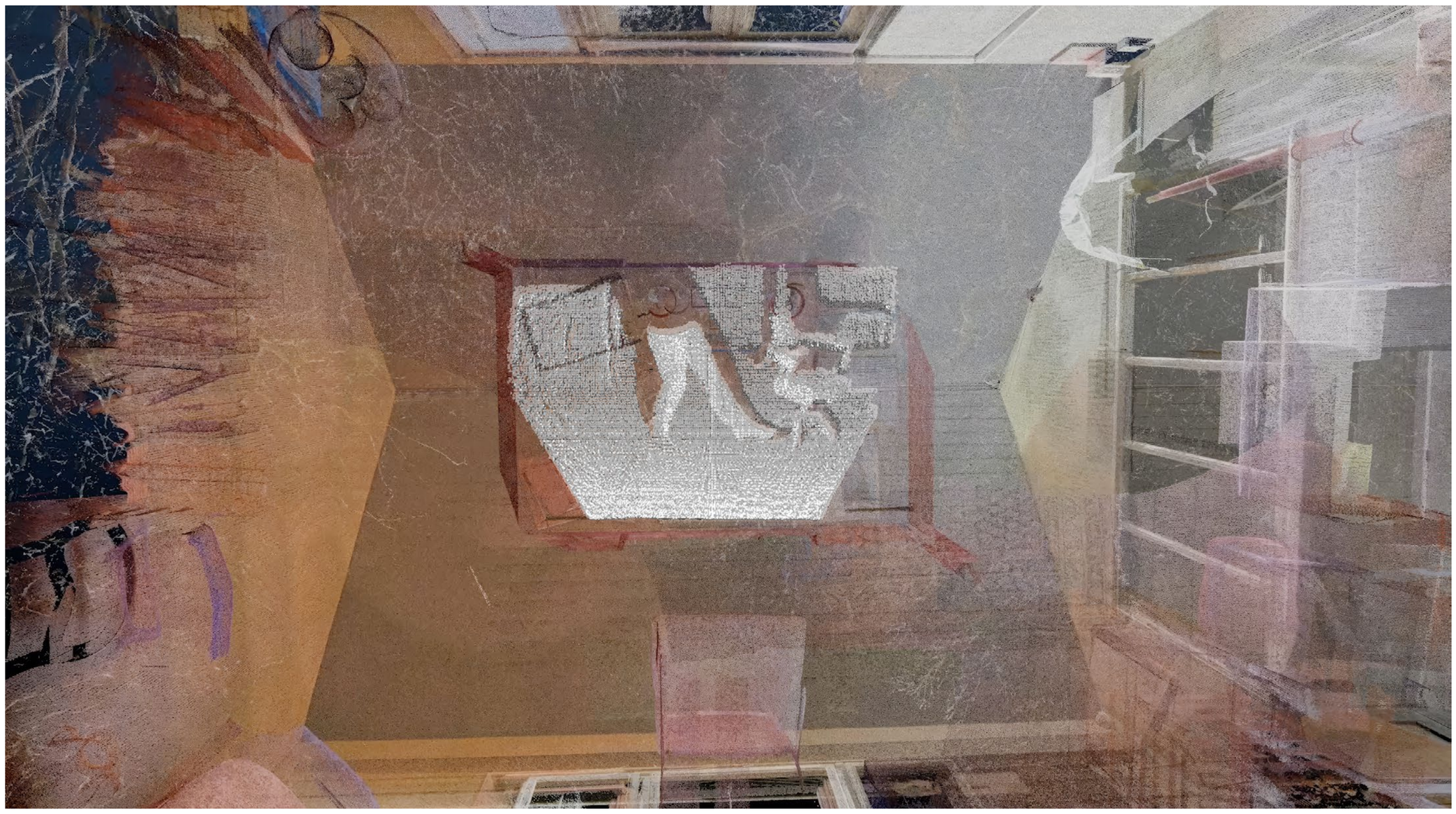

Figure 08.
this voice; this life; this procession, 2024. Video still. Courtesy of Brass Art.

Further, non-optical, post-photographic or 'post-lenticular' (ScanLAB) image-capture technology is frequently harnessed for motion-capture in gaming or accurate scanning and measurement of territory.[40] We process these 'in-visual' point cloud data scans, or 'operational images' (Farocki), which we then synthesise, navigate, and animate.[41] *This voice* is peppered with myriad portals induced by both surprising and intentional material disturbances. We extrapolate from what is occluded or can be hidden to reveal something vital about human experience and perception, beyond the scope and capacity of the technology.

tunnelling | irruption

Returning to Woolf's structures of temporality, her 'harlequinade' offers 'an assortment of conflicting allusions which, in their different directions and tempos drove her narratives forward.'[42] Through this method, we observe the way Woolf's writing inspired Deleuze and Guatarri. Introducing the concept of the rhizome, they insist that writing is not a measure of something else, but instead has everything to do with 'surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come.'[43] In other words, by overlaying and pitching ideas and metaphors against each other, a procession of images is held together in the narrative landscape. These fragmented and contradictory allusions, their interference with pace and tempo, produce a coherent patterning through the amplitude and intensity of the scene. In *this voice* we present this rhizomatic structure in relation to 'tunnelling' — a mode Woolf describes in her diary as a method to 'tell the past by instalments, as I have need of it.'[44] Her rhizome-like, non-hierarchical tendencies enable her to pull apart the characters and reveal past thinking, events, or actions within the over-arching narrative. Literary critic Pelagia Goulimari excavates the entangled genealogies of tunnelling (and shredding) as method, suggesting that Woolf's intertextuality (in conversation with Kafka's concept of the burrow) anticipates and influences Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizomatic. Goulimari writes that in Woolf's diary entries around the time of writing *Mrs Dalloway* she is thinking

of characters as in 'shreds' — shreds that are rhizomatically connected. She keeps returning to a language of tunnels and channels, describing her 'discovery' of a 'tunnelling' method — a method applied not only to characters but also to temporalities.[45]

Tunnelling is apposite for thinking about *this voice*. We want to consider how laser scanning might relate to Deleuze and Guattari's suggestion that 'spatiotemporal relations, determinations, are not predicates of the thing but dimensions of multiplicities', specifically through the processes of scanning and the layered temporal cloud data we gather, treat, and transform.[46] In our work we can relate the scanner's beams — seeking points to reflect spatiotemporal relations — to both 'lines of articulation' and 'lines of flight'.[47] In presenting their book as an assemblage, Deleuze and Guatarri (in their multiplicities) offer a way to consider our processes of making. Their insistence on the fluidity and layered intensities invoked through literature helps us to describe not only the captured LiDAR data cloud but also the data gathered in our multiple performances made on location in selected writers' rooms (like those of Brontë, Freud, and Woolf) over many years. The relationship between these travelling lines and strata of bodies, furniture, artefacts, detritus, interfuse in *this voice*, just as in Woolf's 1925 novel *Mrs Dalloway* the characters' journeys through London accumulate the recent past, the deep past, the present, and the future taking shape.

In a pivotal scene that embodies this accrual and resonates with Goulimari's observation on shredding, Woolf's character Peter Walsh is walking through Regent's Park. He is replaying past events, as if linking and layering atomised feelings. Through these vibrating lines of articulation and flight, his thoughts slip from a ship's cabin and his betrothed, to the drawing room of Clarissa Dalloway's London home, where he is sitting on the sofa, considering her gestures, and their connected interior lives. As his attention focuses on his passions, his tears, the stirring sounds of a woman puncture and invade his introspection, bringing him back into the world. Woolf writes,

> a frail quivering sound, a voice bubbling up without direction, vigour, beginning or end, running weakly and shrilly and with an absence of all human meaning [...] the voice of an ancient spring spouting from the earth.[48]

The origin of this sound is defamiliarised: a tall, quivering shape, a funnel, a rusty pump, a wind beaten tree, a battered woman. But, what Walsh discerns, is that it sings of love: 'love which has lasted a million years'.[49] The primeval bubbling song offers an extraordinary irruption that is both visceral and sonic. It reveals Woolf's engagement with deep time and her sense of worlding as the sound bursts and seeps. The novel *Mrs Dalloway* presents the forces that permeate all things in daily life and create ruptures in our attention, which require us to tunnel this way and that, from interior spaces out into the world and suddenly back again. Julia Briggs proposes that 'Woolf formulates and re-formulates her various breaks and spaces in time because it is across time's chasms, its gaps and fissures, that she must cast her art.'[50]

In *this voice*, the spatial-temporal relations of the surveyed, mapped, and assimilated scans, made in Woolf's garden and writing shed, form a data cloud as each laser beam registers a point in time and space where it touches another surface. The resulting data cloud, created from the touch of a laser on the surface of our skin, has affinities with a sculptural 'cast'; however, in this scanning process we think of this more precisely as creating a 'light-cast'. In our research for *this voice*, we extended the reach of the scanning and making process through our desire to bring different forms of light-cast together. We instinctively decided that scanning should continue when the sun was sinking and light was low (not suitable for traditional light capture) because we wanted to see what this would yield.

We also explored how we might transmute the usual visual aesthetic of data clouds to intensify the sense that Woolf's interior literary space had been bathed and cast in light. We found new ways to intermingle our Kinect-captured bodies with the light-cast, to echo the intensities of her worlding.

Treating the light-cast data clouds as a felt form, something to be handled with care and sensitivity, is important in our approach to heritage settings. Yet we are deeply aware that while we see our process as something more akin to a caress, there is an ambivalence to the idea of touch and gesture. The hand is capable of both tenderness and control — which Woolf herself attests to in *Moments of Being*. In our work we handle the data, the whole scene and everything contained within it, while attending to its resonances and intensities. Consequently, *this voice* invites each audience member into an as yet uncharted connection with this heritage space, as their multiplicities meet the rhizomatic lines of our chosen camera paths through and under the data clouds. In observing our intention to tunnel into and under the data, audience visitor and artist Rowland Hill wrote that reading Woolf's fiction and encountering *this voice*,

> gives me the sensation of floating between inner worlds and physical perspectives. To me, this floating sensation is so visual that it often feels like watching contemporary cinema with advanced camera technology. It was a pure delight, then, to watch your film and see some of these thoughts and feelings reflected — albeit in a totally novel and unexpected way.[51]

sinking | surfacing

In the opening scene of *this voice* Virginia and Leonard Woolf's house sinks slowly into the frame [Fig. 09]. The virtual camera journeys through the purple-tinted haze of small, coloured spots of light, orientated towards a tentatively outlined window — a threshold — as if dreaming of escape. In *this voice* the camera observes thresholds, but it also ignores them, puncturing walls that are usually

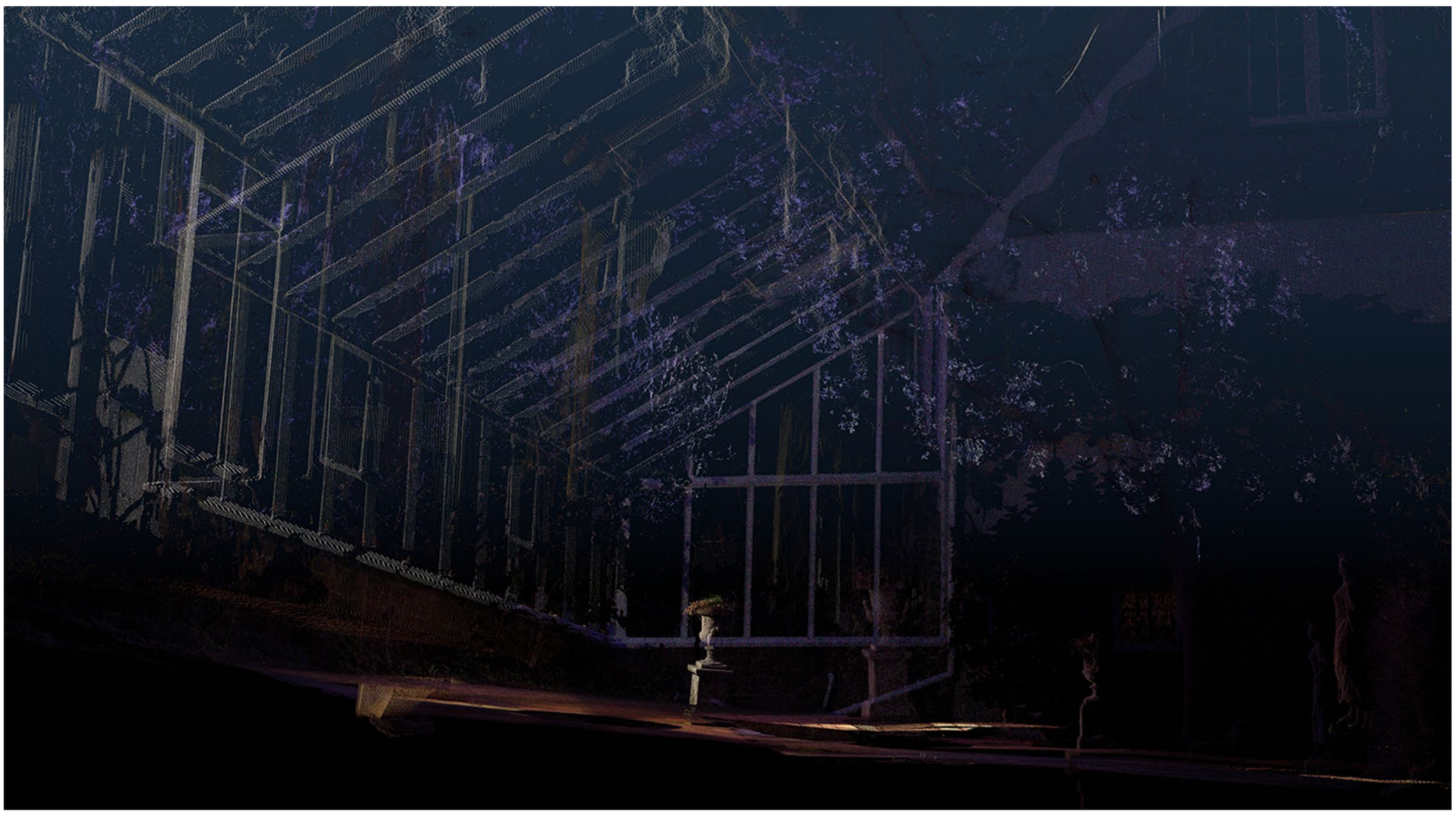

Figure 09.
this voice; this life; this procession, 2024. Video still. Courtesy of Brass Art.

obstructive to movement. Throughout the film, we direct the camera to orientate ourselves in relation to Woolf's writing space and her worlding. In doing so we continually mine the light-cast and in particular the architectural form of her writing room — tunnelling under it, travelling through it, sinking beneath it, viewing it from afar — making it float. These falling and rising points of view are amplified by composer Annie Mahtani's acoustic palette. The intimate small sounds collected and extrapolated by Mahtani incorporate field recordings and crackling cellophane lighting gels to create an immersive and intense soundscape. Mirroring the camera's 'agency' to move on a vertical axis, Mahtani composed the sound to echo this flow, allowing the fluid transmission of sonic intensities to ascend in space.

In one sequence the camera's movement punctures the dark ground under the writing shed, revealing a gravestone and Woolf's writing desk captured as a Kinect apparition. Sinking and turning on its axis, the desk appears to pin the legs and feet of a still figure lying beneath it. This moment is brought into sharp relief as the camera suddenly retreats, thrusting the observer back into Woolf's writing room through an atomised haecceity; a digital veil of milky, incandescent hues. This rupture demands the re-orientation of the writing desk in space and ignites a new sequence of camera movements that further reveal 'dimensions of multiplicities.'

Writing through Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* and the 'thisness' of haecceity, Deleuze and Guattari propose, 'Taking a walk is a haecceity; never again will Mrs. Dalloway say to herself, "I am this, I am that, he is this, he is that".[52] These same multiplicities continue:

> She felt very young; at the same time unspeakably aged. She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on [...] She always had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day.[53]

Most importantly for us apprehending Woolf's temporality, Deleuze and Guattari conclude, 'A



Figure 10.
this voice; this life; this procession, 2024. Video still. Courtesy of Brass Art.

haecceity has neither beginning nor end, origin nor destination; it is always in the middle. It is not made of points, only of lines. It is a rhizome.'[54]

In our re-apprehension of this work — in writing through *this voice* and further engaging with scholarship on Woolf in the post-production phase — we can have a different relationship to the time taken in the making of this work. Ten years elapsed between our initial approach to Monk's House to scan the writing room and the production of *this voice* for exhibition. Over the course of a single day in December 2018 we were able to finally capture it. Within 15 months the Covid pandemic spread and fundamentally shifted our perceptions of connectivity and time. Our interior lives had a different temporality and rhythm, and external connections took on new importance and intensities. The spatial data produced at Woolf's house was large and unwieldy. Processing it as sensorial journeys was slow and time-consuming with many renders, revisions, and editorial decisions.

What is at stake for us as artists and academics are the 'moments of being' that emerge from *this voice* — a consciousness of intense moments of perception, where time flows seem to shift for an audience. Apprehending these multiple, inner and outer, temporal realities questions what we think we know and whether there are other ways of 'knowing' what we know. In our hands the digital spatialising tools, used to measure and record data, reveal intensities of experience and affect that alter our perception of the world we live in, and our interconnectedness to different temporalities and oppositional rhythms. The temporal rhythms we achieve in *this voice* via the pushing through or dragging back of the camera also allow a shift in pace where the camera slows, mimics breathing, pauses its trajectory, and pulls back, or surfaces [Fig. 10]. Through introducing subtle camera movements that present the writing room and the garden landscape as if they were breathing, we bring life and vibrancy to the light-casts [Fig. 05]. Significantly, towards the end of the film we use careful camera alignment to reveal the oppositional falling and rising of the fading dancing figure, enmeshed in the Linden tree, as the film propels us towards the gradual dissolution and suspension of everything.

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author biographies

Brass Art is the long-term collaborative art practice of Lewis, Mojsiewicz, and Pettican. Their work spans drawing, writing, photography, moving image, digital technologies, sculptural installation, and interventions in heritage sites. Their Writers' Rooms series captures performative transgressions in the museum-homes of the Brontë sisters, Sigmund Freud, and Virginia Woolf.

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imagining the unseen: ai, memoryscapes, and the interiorities of the red road flats

Xiaobin Huang
University of Edinburgh
0009-0005-4279-582X

abstract

The interior is deeply interwoven with human subjectivity, serving as a repository for memory and affect. This intrinsic connection is profoundly challenged when urban renewal leads to the erasure of the built environment, displacing the collective memory of entire communities. The following exploration confronts this issue through the case study of the demolished Red Road Flats in Glasgow, positioning generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) as a speculative medium for preserving and representing marginalised histories. This research proposes a new approach that translates former residents' memories into a series of evocative interior moments. The process starts by producing 2D images and ends with 3D physical items being created. Instead of redeeming AI's non-literal and associational nature as technical constraints, the approach openly receives them as a creative catalyst. Through this human–computer collaborative work, ensuing visual depictions are empowered to step out of mere fact-based rehabilitation. In the final installation, it produces a new type of physical memorial that gives tangible form to individuals' subjective experiences. The work not only proposes a new template for commemoration of lost architectural history, it also shows the significant potential of AI to develop counter-narratives with images that challenge monolithic official histories.

keywords

generative AI; collective memory; speculative interior; architectural representation; interiority

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so many memories gone in seconds

The comment ‘So many memories gone in seconds…’ left under a YouTube video of a Glasgow tower block demolition encapsulates a central conflict of urban renewal.[1] The demolition of architecture is often hailed as a sign of progress, but for the people who lived there, the spectacle means that countless memories vanish in an instant. Councillors, officials, and local media celebrate the demise of a high-rise building, viewing it as progress.[2] These demolition actions are hailed as the ‘renaissance’ of the city, a necessary process towards a better future. However, beneath this grand narrative of progress, a fundamental question emerges: for those who once lived here, when the physical embodiment of home becomes invisible, where will their memories go? How do we preserve memories that are simultaneously constituted and effaced by the built environment?

Red Road Flats in Glasgow is a microcosm of this issue. Built in the mid-1960s to tackle the city's housing crisis, the flats were once the tallest residential structures in Europe, providing accommodation for almost 5000 people.[3] However, in the 2000s, a dominant narrative from official sources and media portrayed the Red Road Flats as a failed social experiment, branding them unsustainable and ripe for demolition. In the letter sent to residents by Glasgow Housing Association (GHA) in 2004, for instance, it detailed the various drawbacks of high-rise housing, including substantial maintenance and modernisation costs, excessive population density, and detrimental effects on children's developmental environments.[4] More importantly, it pointed out that the presence of asbestos in architecture renders any renovation attempt extremely hazardous and prohibitively costly.[5] The GHA letter is a small but significant inscription within the assemblage of objects that work to translate Red Road into a housing failure.[6]

However, Red Road Flats is not merely an architectural technology that could be summarised as ‘success’ or ‘failure’; within its walls lies the living space of many people. The narratives and memories of these residents are dispersed across unofficial archives, revealing qualities that stand in stark contrast to a rigid technocratic logic. For instance, in Alison Irvine’s novel *This Road is Red*, the book shows the changes and the community spirit in the area through the real stories of some of the flats’ residents.[7] Similarly, in Patricia Ferguson’s short film, she revisits her former home, retracing the spectral threads of her memories of Red Road.[8] These works offer us a glimpse into a multifaceted and intricate internal world — one that encompasses both the warm, joyful fragments of domestic life and the affective scenes of anxiety and sorrow. It is through these memories that we can still evoke an imagination of Red Road’s interior landscapes, even long after its physical structures have been erased.

Moreover, these accounts provide a unique portal through which to explore the rich 'Interiorities' of the physically erased community. Here, ‘Interiority’ is understood as a broader mode of subjective experience expressed through memories, emotions, imagination, and social relations. As Lajer-Burcharth and Söntgen argue, the relationship between interior space and human interiority has been constructed through multiple historical trajectories, including literary self-reflection, visual representation, architectural experience, and psychoanalytic conceptions of the self.[9] Interiority can therefore be understood as a cultural and psychological condition through which individuals negotiate identity, belonging, and lived experience. What is more, it is the medium through which a building embodies and communicates the inner lives of its inhabitants — their memories, imaginations, emotions, and desires.[10]

This broader understanding is particularly significant in the case of the Red Road Flats. When the Red Road Flats were physically erased, and official discourse reduced them to a monotonous narrative of technical failure, the community’s collective memory was placed at risk of erasure.

Collective memory is not an objective replication of past facts; rather, it consists of 'images of the past' that are continually negotiated through communication within a group to sustain its continuity of identity and sense of belonging.[11] Within this process, interiority persists through stories, recollections, emotions, and everyday experiences that survive beyond the lifespan of the physical architecture itself.

Therefore, the excavation and representation of Interiority is a vital means of preserving those memories that are constituted and effaced by the built environment. The challenge of representing demolished environments has traditionally been addressed through documentary forms such as photography, architectural drawings, archival reconstruction, and digital modelling. While these approaches are valuable for preserving physical information, they often prioritise accuracy, material evidence, and spatial fidelity. Such methods are highly effective in recording what a building looked like, but are less equipped to represent how it was experienced, remembered, or emotionally inhabited.

A different representational objective is adopted in this essay. Instead of asking how the Red Road Flats can be reconstructed, it asks how their interiorities might be reimagined. The aim is not to recover an objectively accurate image of the past, but to visualise the affective and mnemonic worlds embedded within residents' recollections. Yet a fundamental contradiction arises: while these memory archives are imbued with profound emotion, they exist primarily in textual form, whereas the interiorities they describe emerge through complex entanglements of spatial experience, memory, affect, and social relations. How, then, might these intangible interior worlds be translated into perceptible forms without reducing them to mere architectural reconstruction?

Therefore, this essay aims to explore a design method capable of transforming these fragmented, subjective textual memories into speculative interiors that counter the grand narratives of urban development. By translating and reconstructing these subjective interior spaces, it does not merely document a 'failed' architectural project; rather, it actively rebuilds the shared emotional landscapes and identity values of the Red Road community, ensuring that its cultural spirit endures long after its physical structures have been erased.

A visualised counter-history of the Red Road Flats is constructed in three stages. First, the section 'Translation of Memory' elaborates on the methodological workflow, demonstrating how sensory anchors are extracted from fragmented oral archives. It further argues how the 'hallucinatory' nature of generative AI resonates with the psychological logic of subjective reconstruction inherent in human nostalgia. Subsequently, the 'Analysis of Memoryscapes' section provides a visual analysis of AI-generated interiors, exploring how these landscapes capture and represent the complex Interiority and emotional values of the residents through a speculative visual language. Finally, the 'Memory Sculptures' section turns toward the dimension of artistic practice, documenting the collaboration between the researcher and AI. By utilising depth estimation and handcrafted ornamentation, digital hallucinations are transformed into tangible physical installations. At the end of this section, it tries to answer a fundamental question: When a community is physically demolished, how can we, as artists and designers, collaborate with AI to reimagine and represent the intangible memories of its former residents?

translation of memory

> We had two bedrooms and a box room. You could put a bed in the box room and a wee bit of furniture, and it had no windows, so you were in complete darkness. Any time of the day, it could be any season, and it would be complete darkness, and you'd wake up and couldn't see your arm or your hand in

> front of your face. My mum put a drying rail up, and that's where she'd hang the washing, in this tiny wee box room. It must only have been about seven feet long and three feet wide. I think some folk used to just put junk in there. But we put a bed and a wee cabinet, and a wee record player or a tape player in there. We drilled a hole in the wall, which was a no-no because of the asbestos, but we drilled a hole in the wall and plugged into Mum and Dad's electrical supply. It was great, it was a great wee room.[12]
>
> Finlay McKay

This passage captures the recollection of a former resident regarding the 'wee room' from his memory. In his description, the space is characterised by minimal natural lighting and extreme spatial constraints, yet it is celebrated as a 'great wee room.' Concrete spatial descriptions are sparse; instead, the narrative presents a montage of life snapshots, collaged from arrangements of furniture — a bed, a cupboard, a record player, and other domestic objects. This scene, constructed through words, is not a precisely measured drawing, but rather a blurred yet vivid emotional sketch. Although it lacks concrete forms or distinct details, it successfully evokes the overall atmosphere and impression of the space.

From a psychological perspective, the sketch-like quality of this narrative finds its logical support in the theories of Nostalgia. Nostalgia is not a simple, objective reproduction of the past, but a profound subjective reconstruction.[13] When we attempt to look back, the brain is not retrieving a faithful recording; for at the moment of experience, we never pressed a record button, and in the moment of recollection, there is no replay button. Instead, memory is essentially a highly imprecise, creative reorganisation. Within this profound longing for the past, the process of memory reconstruction often undergoes a 'warm' skew.[14] While the actual lived experiences of the past may not have been entirely positive, through the lens of nostalgia, our brains tend to filter out specific, trivial distractions to capture a broader, more universal atmosphere of the era.

In other words, nostalgia causes us to remember the overall impression of a period rather than every precise physical detail. This explains why the resident's recollection lacks technical accuracy yet is saturated with a dense sense of atmosphere. The function of memory here is not to restore historical archives, but to serve as an emotional bridge, establishing a form of spiritual continuity between the scarcity of the present and the perceived abundance of the past. Therefore, nostalgic memory is a highly selective subjective construction. It stitches together personal desires, emotional tensions, and material fragments, ultimately forming a psychological landscape that, despite its blurred outlines, possesses authentic emotional depth. Though it lacks a clear physical outline, it reconstructs that living internal world through the simulation of atmosphere rather than the replication of details.

While this nostalgia-driven psychological landscape is physically absent, its sensory authenticity offers a profound alternative dimension for architectural representation. When traditional, precision-oriented mapping fails to capture such irrational interiority, the research lens must shift from what this essay terms the *rehabilitation of facts* toward the *speculation of experience*. This transition leads to the core design category of this study: the Speculative Interior.

The reconstruction of such affective textures necessitates a conceptual framework that moves beyond mere archival restoration. Traditional architectural representation, while precise, often fails to account for the 'voids' left by official histories — the intangible gaps between public records and the lived subjectivity of residents. To bridge this rift, this research engages with the concept of the speculative interior as an apparatus of memory. Originally proposed by Evan Pavka, this framework positions interior spaces as vital intermediaries where personal oral histories and familial records can coalesce to

challenge monolithic official narratives.[15] For instance, in his research case studies, students imagined the hidden lives of passengers aboard the Komagata Maru by drawing its cross-section or collaborating with family members to recreate destroyed buildings in Japanese Canadian internment camps through architectural drawings and sectional models.[16]

However, where Pavka's methodology traditionally relies on human designers to interpret and draw these counter-narratives, this study proposes a significant methodological evolution: replacing the human hand with the generative capacity of Artificial Intelligence (AI). This shift is not merely a change in tool, but a profound response to the psychological mechanism of nostalgia. While manual drawing often strives for a degree of formal or structural logic, the representational medium of memory should ideally mirror the subjective, reconstructive nature of the mind.

Generative AI is proposed here as the ideal speculative medium. Rather than replicating, AI 'hallucinates'; in this context, the term does not denote an error, but rather the creative act of generating plausible new details by associating patterns from its training data. This process, operating through association rather than logic, aligns with the non-linear, non-rational qualities of memory and oral history.[17] As architectural theorist Kudless suggests, AI's generative qualities, which often produce abstract or interpretive results, are uniquely suited for representing memory.[18] The visual outputs of this process are what this essay terms 'Memoryscapes': defined not as photorealistic reconstructions of a lost physical space, but as speculative visual translations of subjective, narrative memories that prioritise affective texture over technical precision. Moreover, these AI-generated Memoryscapes function not as a destination, but as a fertile threshold for human intervention, allowing the researcher to fill semantic voids with artistic language and reclaim the interiority of a vanished community.

five-stage speculative workflow

To translate ephemeral oral histories into tangible spatial forms, this research establishes a structured yet interpretive five-stage methodology. This process moves beyond mere data processing; it is designed as a collaborative translation between human memory, machine hallucination, and physical craft.

Phase I: Narrative Excavation and Sensory Anchor Extraction

Gathered textual descriptions of Red Road Apartments from novels, interviews, and online archives, while meticulously extracting fragmented spatial clues. The sources include: «This Road is Red»; Red Road Stories — online residents' recollections collected by the Glasgow Housing Association (GHA).[19] Rather than seeking structural data, this stage focuses on extracting specific domestic objects or atmospheric qualities that serve as the building blocks of a resident's subjective reality.

Phase II: Semantic Translation and Speculative Prompting

This step is crucial for translating the oral history into narrative prompts comprehensible to AI. Rather than merely listing keywords, we systematically reconstruct the text. The process first extracts physical anchors forming the scene's framework (such as tiny box room, no windows), then captures sensory and atmospheric cues that imbue the scene with emotional resonance (such as complete darkness, claustrophobic). For example, based on the memory of 'box room', this is the input prompt for Midjourney:

> *An interior of a tiny windowless apartment box room, complete darkness but illuminated by the warm, amber glow of a vintage record player, a single small bed, a drying rail with laundry hanging overhead, cosy --v 5.2 --ar 1:1.*

Phase III: Iterative Visualisation of Memoryscapes

Using Midjourney, the research undergoes an iterative process of image generation to produce what we term Memoryscapes. These are speculative visual translations where the AI's ability to associate patterns from training data is leveraged to fill the semantic gaps in human memory. The goal is to reach a visual expression that resonates profoundly with the text's original emotional undertones.

The selection process during this phase was not based on photorealistic accuracy but on what this essay terms *affective resonance*: the capacity of an image to communicate the emotional register of the original testimony. For every final Memoryscape chosen, dozens of iterations were discarded. The researcher acted as a curator, identifying what might be called *correct errors* — such as the surreal placement of objects — that better mirrored the fragmented and heightened nature of nostalgic recall than a logically perfect image would.

It is important to note that this process was far from automatic or consistently successful. Many generated images were rejected during the iterative workflow. For example, the model failed to respond to key elements of the prompts. Technical limitations also emerged, including distorted spatial relationships, inconsistent scales, and implausible architectural configurations that weakened the credibility of the resulting Memoryscapes.

Furthermore, the outputs often reflected biases embedded within the model's training data. Narratives drawn from working-class social housing in Glasgow were sometimes translated into idealised or commercially styled domestic environments, revealing a tendency towards dominant visual archetypes rather than the specific social and cultural realities of Red Road. Consequently, human judgement remained essential throughout the process. The researcher continuously evaluated, rejected, and revised generated images, negotiating between algorithmic suggestion and narrative fidelity in order to produce Memoryscapes that remained both speculative and emotionally resonant.

Importantly, not all hallucinations were treated as errors. A key distinction emerged between productive and unproductive hallucinations. Productive hallucinations referred to AI-generated elements that were absent from the original narratives yet amplified their emotional, atmospheric, or symbolic qualities. For example, the introduction of unexpected domestic objects or exaggerated material conditions occasionally revealed aspects of everyday life that resonated with the broader affective character of a memory. Such outputs were retained and analysed as speculative interpretations rather than factual reconstructions.

By contrast, unproductive hallucinations were rejected when they disrupted the narrative coherence of the memory or introduced visual elements disconnected from the social and spatial context of Red Road. Examples included excessively fantastical environments, implausible architectural forms, or irrelevant objects that transformed lived memories into generic dreamscapes. The aim of the curation process was therefore not to eliminate hallucination altogether, but to identify those hallucinations that meaningfully contributed to the representation of collective memory while excluding those that obscured it.

Therefore, the speculative nature of generative AI introduces uncertainties. The same narrative can produce radically different visual outcomes depending on prompt construction, model updates, or algorithmic biases embedded within training data. While this ambiguity aligns productively with the reconstructive nature of nostalgia, it also raises important questions concerning authenticity, representation, and authorship.

Phase IV: Speculation via Depth Estimation

While the 2D images capture the affective texture of memory, the translation into three-dimensional

form offers an additional mode through which these subjective experiences can be materially encountered.[20] The translation into three-dimensional form was not pursued in order to increase spatial accuracy, but to explore whether collective memories could acquire a form of material presence beyond the screen. By giving physical substance to otherwise intangible recollections, the resulting sculptures invite viewers to engage with memory not only visually, but also as an embodied and spatial encounter.

ZoeDepth is an advanced AI model capable of estimating depth information from a single image.[21] This process is itself a further layer of speculation rather than a neutral act of reconstruction. The AI-generated depth map proposes one possible interpretation of the spatial relationships embedded within the Memoryscape. Consequently, the resulting sculptures should be understood as material translations of subjective memories, shaped through successive acts of narration, machine speculation, and human interpretation.

Phase V: Physical Manifestation and Subjective Ornamentation

The final stage of this methodology gives physical form to the digital models, transforming them into tangible artefacts. The process began with fabricating the 3D digital files into physical objects via laser cutting. Following this, each model underwent 'ornamentation' — a deliberate act of hand-applied colouring and texturing. This human intervention, grounded in architectural theorist Antoine Picon's work on ornament and subjectivity, allows the designer to reclaim creative agency from the algorithm, infusing the cold industrial output with the warmth or trauma of the original lived experience.[22]

analysis of memoryscapes: visualising the unseen interiorities

The Memoryscapes generated in this study are not objective replications of past physical spaces; rather, they serve as a series of speculative visual translations designed to challenge official grand narratives. While official discourse, such as the 2004 Glasgow Housing Association (GHA) letter, reduced the Red Road Flats to a monolithic symbol of 'technical failure' and unsustainable housing, the following analysis of four core cases demonstrates how AI-driven hallucinations fill the gaps within these official archives. Together, these images constitute a multifaceted emotional spectrum that restores the marginalised subjectivity of the residents.

In contrast to official narratives that branded the flats as detrimental developmental environments, the first two cases illustrate how residents anchored dignity and warmth within restricted spaces through everyday domesticity.



Figure 01.
'Wee Room'. AI-generated Memoryscape created by the author using Midjourney.

The first AI-generated image is a visual translation of an oral history account concerning a 'box room', a space imbued with emotional ambivalence [Fig. 01]. The narrator describes this area as a cramped chamber 'without windows', 'completely dark', yet ultimately refers to it emotionally as 'a great wee room.'[23] It precisely captures and magnifies this duality. On one hand, the overall composition

and atmosphere convey a profound sense of enclosure. The deep green walls, heavy shadows cast by a single overhead light source, and the tight, cluttered space filled with various objects all resonate with the physical descriptions of 'tiny' and 'darkness' in the text.[24]

On the other hand, the AI hallucinated the narrator's deep emotional attachment to this space. For instance, the walls hung with photographs, clocks, the warm-toned textiles on the left, and the vintage-patterned carpet on the floor collectively fostered a chaotic yet profoundly cosy atmosphere, despite these elements not being explicitly mentioned in the original text. The washing machine, which is absent from the text, is a classic AI hallucination. It likely stems from a misinterpretation of the phrase 'drying rail with washing'.[25] Yet this 'error' proves remarkably 'correct' on a speculative level; it brutally implants traces of domestic routine into this private teenage space through surreal means.

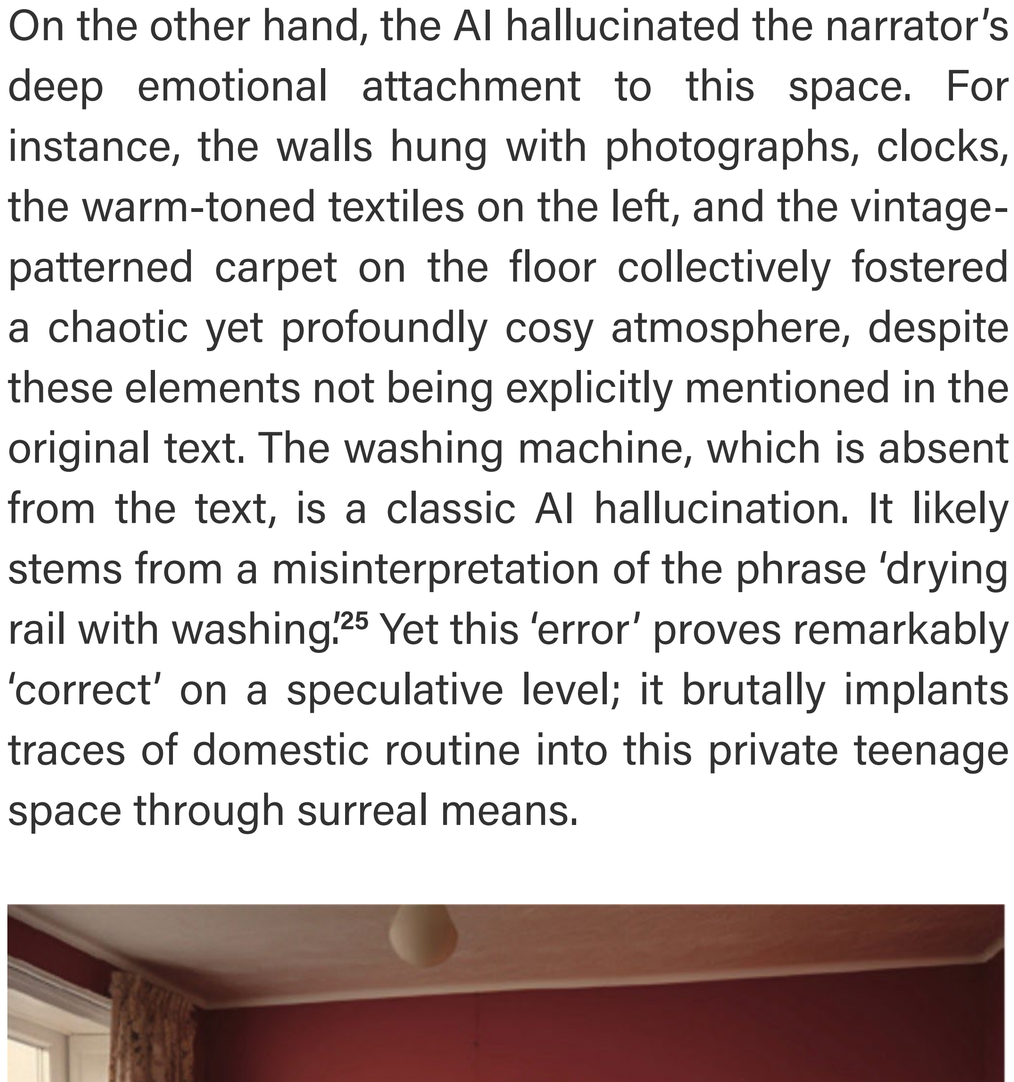

Figure 02.
'Outlive'. AI-generated Memoryscape created by the author using Midjourney.

Moreover, the hallucinated picture frames, placed erratically throughout the room amid the crowding of tools and junk, profoundly reveal the reality of forced functional mixing within high-density housing, and the preciousness of this adolescent carving out a secret base within such a reality. Thus, this image is not a restoration of physical space, but rather, through the materialisation of the interior, presents the coexisting emotions of individual repression and attachment.

This expectation of permanence is further echoed in the second image, 'Outlive', which originates from a family memory about red wallpaper, exploring 'home' as an expectation of permanence [Fig. 02].[26] The narrative's description of the space only mentions a table and the wallpaper, with the father proudly proclaiming that the wallpaper 'will outlast us.'[27] The AI's interpretation of this text once again demonstrates its ability to combine and hallucinate symbols. The AI amplifies the core element of 'red wallpaper', causing the entire space to be dominated by a strong red colour, including a red sofa and tableware. Sunlight streams in through the window, casting warm patches of light on the red sofa and walls, further reinforcing this atmosphere of warmth and hope. Although no era or style was specified in the prompt, the output consistently drew on recognisable visual conventions of 1970s domestic interiors, translating a brief exchange into a fully realised space with a distinct period character and emotional warmth. This tendency suggests the influence of dominant visual archetypes within the model's training data, the composition of which is not publicly documented.

In contrast to the previously discussed memories filled with ambivalent warmth, 'Frozen' originates from a description of steeping in pain and helplessness, describing the physical decay of the apartment building in its later years [Fig. 03].

> The houses are frozen, the windows are getting in rain [...] the dampness is all over the walls in the kitchen, bathroom, hall press and the window ledges are full of black mould.[28]
>
> Red Road Stories



Figure 03.
'Frozen'. AI-generated Memoryscape created by the author using Midjourney.

The AI's translation of this text fully leverages its ability to create a 'distorted' and 'uncanny' atmosphere, sublimating a physical problem into a psychological horror experience. The image presents an abandoned, horrifying bathroom. The AI accurately captures the core elements from the text: the frost on the windows, the large areas of peeling and water stains on the walls (dampness), and the mould-like filth on the floor and objects (black mould). Through extreme low-key lighting, strong chiaroscuro, and dilapidated details (such as a broken mirror and a dirty bathtub), it 'hallucinates' a housing problem into an almost uninhabitable ruin. This familiar domestic scene (the bathroom), under the AI's 'hallucination', becomes strange and threatening, thereby accurately reproducing the traumatic psychological feeling of a 'home' no longer being a sanctuary.

In contrast, 'Wet room' is a visual hallucination of a sudden catastrophe, based on a traumatic memory of returning home after a fire: 'There was a terrible smell of smoke [...] the carpets sodden, and there was fungus on the walls. Their panicked beds were wet through'[29] [Fig. 04]. The AI's translation of this text is not limited to singular elements of decay; instead, it constructs a post-disaster scene filled with dramatic tension.

The AI captures the core symbols of disaster from the text: the smoke pervading the air, the books and papers scattered on the floor, seemingly soaked with water (sodden carpets, wet books), and the broken windows. However, the AI does not render a messy, modern apartment living room. Instead, it hallucinates a space resembling a classical study, where tall bookshelves allude to the cultural value of the destroyed objects. Light dramatically streams in through the broken windows, illuminating the dust and smoke in the air, creating an 'aesthetic of ruin' that is both tragic and imbued with a sense of the sacred.[30] The highly emotive phrase from the text, 'panicked beds', is translated by the AI into the chaotic state of the entire space.[31] Notably, the lone chair standing in the light becomes a powerful symbol for the displaced resident and their interrupted daily life. This image thus transcends a simple representation of a disaster scene, becoming a visual allegory about loss and chaos.



Figure 04.
'Wet room'. AI-generated Memoryscape created by the author using Midjourney.

These four cases demonstrate that AI is not merely a tool but a collaborator in constructing a collective counter-history. By embracing rather than avoiding machine hallucination, these Memoryscapes give tangible sensory form to the intangible memories of a vanished community. This synthesis ensures that the Interiority of the Red Road Flats can be peered at through the transparent, rational shell of official history, allowing the community's cultural spirit to endure.

memory sculptures

In this essay, memory sculptures refers to the physical outcome of transforming AI-generated digital images into tangible art through spatial data and manual crafting. This stage of the research directly addresses a central question: how can artists and designers collaborate with AI to represent the intangible memories of a community that has been physically demolished? Rather than simply documenting an architectural project, this process aims to rebuild the emotional landscapes of the Red Road community by filling the gaps left by official records. In this sense, the sculptures operate as material translations of the Memoryscapes, providing a physical medium through which otherwise intangible memories, emotions, and interior experiences may be encountered.

The process begins by using AI tools, such as ZoeDepth, to extract depth information from the 2D Memoryscapes. This allows the designer to translate flat images into 3D layered models via laser cutting. These physical layers act as a structural foundation for the memory, yet their raw, industrial texture initially lacks the emotional warmth of actual lived experience. To fill this gap, the designer introduces Speculative Ornamentation, which means, through the manual application of textures and colours, to reclaim creative agency from the algorithm. This stage is theoretically grounded in the work of Antoine Picon, who argues that ornament is far from a superfluous addition to architecture; rather, it is a direct projection of subjectivity into the material world.[32] It allows the artist to inject human sensory details back into the cold machine output.

Taking the 'Wee Room' model as an example, the choice was made to randomly spray fine white and gold specks over a deep, oppressive dark base [Fig. 05]. This visual treatment aligns perfectly with the warmth inherent in nostalgia: although the actual physical space was windowless, claustrophobic, and threatened by asbestos, it remains a secure and warm haven in the depths of the narrator's memory.



Figure 05.
'Wet Room' Memory Sculpture. Laser-cut physical model derived from an AI-generated Memoryscape and hand-finished by the author.

In contrast, for the 'Wet Room' model, which symbolises fire and decay, the palette shifts entirely toward aggressive dark greys and charred blacks [Fig. 06]. The coarse, granular texture transmits a sense of ash-like desolation to the fingertips. This tactile discomfort directly echoes the helplessness and despair experienced by residents as they witnessed the destruction of their homes.

Central to this work is a deliberate visual tension. The precise, rational grid on the transparent acrylic panels manifests the 'official' identity of

the flats as a modernist architectural entity — standardised, measurable, and objective. This transparent shell serves as a ghostly outline, merely framing the contour of a reality that often remains 'unseen.'



Figure 06.
'Wet room' Memory Sculpture. Laser-cut physical model derived from an AI-generated Memoryscape and hand-finished by the author.

Suspended within this rational framework are seven abstract models, varied in form, dappled in colour, and imbued with emotion. They represent the unofficial, subjective, chaotic, and contradictory personal memories. Through this juxtaposition, the installation materialises the core conflict: the clash between the public and narrative and personal memory. The audience is invited to peer through the transparent, which represents 'official history', to glimpse the world of true 'interiority' composed of countless personal stories within.

synthesising agency: human-ai collaboration in heritage

By positioning generative AI as a collaborator, the oral histories and texts of former residents of Glasgow's Red Road Flats can be translated into perceptible Memoryscapes and tangible memory sculptures. These interior images produced through this method emerge from a speculative process of 'hallucination.'[33] This associative process, which prioritises pattern recognition over strict logic, aligns with the psychological mechanisms of human nostalgia. Within this framework, nostalgia operates as a subjective memory reconstruction rather than an exact replication of facts, serving as an emotional bridge between the scarcity of the present and the perceived abundance of the past.

AI's 'hallucinations' effectively capture the non-linear and uncertain qualities of memory, providing visual continuity for the sensory fragments found in resident narratives. This approach offers a vital resistance to the grand narratives of urban renewal, which simplified the Red Road Flats into a monolithic symbol of technical failure and silenced the rich interior lives of its inhabitants. By introducing the speculative potential of AI, this method gives sensory form to these marginalised interiorities, restoring the building as an emotional container for subjectivity rather than a cold, objective entity.

Finally, the roles of AI and the designer are also topics worthy of discussion. Although the project is framed as a human–AI collaboration, the distribution of agency throughout the workflow was uneven. AI was responsible for generating visual possibilities and speculative spatial interpretations, yet every critical decision remained dependent upon human judgement. The selection of archival materials, extraction of sensory anchors, construction of prompts, evaluation of outputs, and final transformation into physical artefacts were all directed by the researcher. In this sense, AI functioned less as an autonomous author and more as a generative instrument operating within parameters established by human intention.

This became particularly evident during the iterative visualisation stage. A single memory narrative often produced dozens of alternative images, many of which were discarded. The decision to retain or reject an image was based on its capacity to communicate the emotional and atmospheric qualities embedded within the original testimony, and not on technical quality alone. Consequently, authorship emerged



Figure 07.
Final installation composed of seven Memory Sculptures suspended within an acrylic framework referencing the original Red Road Flats grid. Photograph of physical installation created by the author.

beyond the production of images themselves, through a continuous process of selection, interpretation, and negotiation. The researcher did not simply accept machine outputs; rather, the final Memoryscapes were actively curated through repeated cycles of prompting, evaluation, rejection, and refinement.

Rather than locating authorship exclusively within either the human designer or the algorithm, this project suggests a model of negotiated authorship. The resulting images emerged from an ongoing dialogue between resident testimony, machine association, and human interpretation. While AI introduced unexpected visual possibilities through pattern-based generation, the researcher continuously shaped the direction of the process by determining which outputs aligned with the project's conceptual aims. Authorship therefore resided not in a single act of creation but in the negotiation between human intentionality and algorithmic contingency.

Furthermore, the transition from digital speculation to physical manifestation through ZoeDepth-driven modelling provides the final stage of agency reclamation. The application of ornament serves as a direct projection of subjectivity into the material world. Therefore, the manual application of textures infuses the cold, industrial output of the laser cutter with the warmth or trauma of lived experience. This intervention introduces a further layer of human interpretation into the workflow. Through the manual application of textures, colours, and material adjustments, the memory sculptures become sites of continued negotiation between machine-generated speculation and human experience. The resulting artefacts therefore embody a hybrid form of authorship shaped through successive acts of translation and reinterpretation. As Chen suggests, AI-driven tools may unlock new forms of artistic expression and extend the boundaries of what is possible in art.[34]

In the present study, the researcher functioned as an intermediary between resident testimony and machine generation, translating archival memories into prompts, evaluating outputs, and shaping the final visual narratives. While this curatorial role was necessary for the development of the project, it also concentrates interpretative authority within a single individual.

Future developments in generative technologies may enable a more participatory model of memory reconstruction. Rather than relying on researchers to mediate between communities and AI systems, former residents could potentially engage directly with generative tools, contributing prompts, evaluating outputs, and collaboratively shaping representations of their own histories. In such a framework, the role of the researcher may shift from author or curator towards facilitator, designer of platforms, or steward of the process itself.

This possibility raises important questions concerning authorship, authority, and representation. If AI systems become sufficiently accessible and transparent, can collective memory be co-produced directly by communities rather than interpreted through academic or artistic intermediaries? Such a transition would fundamentally transform the politics of heritage representation, redistributing creative agency from institutions and researchers towards the communities whose memories are being preserved.

conclusion

When the physical environment of a community is erased by urban renewal, generative AI emerges as a vital speculative medium to prevent the 'voiding' of collective memory. Through the implementation of a five-stage speculative workflow, it becomes evident that AI's non-linear hallucinations function not as technical flaws but as essential creative catalysts that mirror the subjective and fragmented nature of human nostalgia.

The strength of this collaborative model between artist and algorithm lies in its capacity to anchor digital visions into a tangible, human-perceived reality. While AI generates initial Memoryscapes

through symbolic association, the designer's intervention provides the necessary material grounding to bridge the gap between machine logic and lived experience. Such a process intends to fill the technocratic silence of official archives with a visualised 'counter-history' composed of individual interiorities.

Ultimately, the Memory Sculptures produced in this method prove that preserving heritage is not merely a task of scanning physical shells, but of reimagining the invisible spiritual worlds of former residents. It does not seek to recover a lost architectural reality; instead, it creates a material encounter with the interiorities that persist beyond the disappearance of physical space. This methodological template offers potential for future applications in digital humanities and heritage protection, providing a way to ensure that the cultural spirit of displaced communities endures long after their physical structures have been erased.

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author biography

Xiaobin Huang is a PhD candidate at Edinburgh College of Art, The University of Edinburgh. His research examines screens and screening technologies across traditional Chinese and contemporary media contexts, combining media theory with experimental digital practice. His current work explores generative AI as a speculative medium for representing displaced architectural memory.

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