The Great Indoors
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ABSTRACT

This paper locates an interior condition, The Great Indoors, relative to the Great Outdoors via historical and contemporary notions of wilderness and its associations to awe, wonder, fear and chaos. Extending beyond the conventions of the picturesque view given by overlooks or large expanses of window glass, The Great Indoors is considered as a temporal and political vessel vulnerable to contemporary (interior) storm clouds. The migration of atmosphere-forming weather and wilderness across the sill is most notably activated by the works of Henry David Thoreau, John Ruskin, Vladimir Jankovic, James Turrell, and New Zealand architects, Stuart Gardyne and Michael Bennett.

WILDERNESS AT LARGE

In 1845 Henry David Thoreau sauntered into the Massachusetts forest where he reportedly built a small dwelling with his own hands. The makeshift structure has become emblematic for its frugal construction as provisional resistance to the pervasive climate and the tempering demands of civilization. (Figure 1) As the story goes, the remotely sited, single-room cabin fostered an interior space in which Thoreau could think and write, a space so unencumbered by the ills and noise of everyday life that a work of prosaic philosophy could emerge. (Figure 2) Thoreau wrote:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. 1

Thoreau’s Walden or life in the woods is an address upon socio-political consciousness specific to mid-nineteenth century American life. As an introspective diary saturated by romanticism, material economy and social commentary, it is a text that kindles poetic reflection, self-sufficiency and resilience towards political and cultural conformity. Thoreau’s poignant examination of life and thought in ‘The New World’ pinpoints a transitional moment in western culture’s notion of wilderness.

In the Middle Ages, wilderness prevailed as a form of nature that instilled fear rather than wonder or pleasure. As Pollarck states, it was a limitless and lawless state, a physical territory as well as a mental attitude strongly aligned with the rhetoric of the sublime. 2 J. B. Jackson claims that this notion of wilderness was replaced in the early eighteenth century by a view central to American history’s relation to Nature Romanticism, whereby:

The belief that any one exposed to the forest for a certain length of time underwent a spiritual awakening, became aware of the Seamless Web of Being, and thereafter renounced the world.3

As the means to possess and cultivate land in the early nineteenth century increased, the concept of wilderness acquired a pastoral and picturesque definition that saw it as an aesthetic and domesticated view hemmed in by wilderness: i.e. wilderness with reference to un-owned, as opposed to unknown. As early as 1888, American hunting groups with a goal ‘to promote manly sport with the rifle’ formed the tenets of contemporary wilderness experience and land policy.4 This form of wilderness acquired two distinct identities: one, where ‘wilderness’ implied a state of mind, ‘terra incognita’ (a concept created and held by individuals and groups), and two, a political construct (a specific protected area defined and designated by government decree).5

Wilderness, as a discrete physical entity, is central to a current legal battle between ecologists wanting to protect the last stands of wilderness from human intervention, and lobbyists sponsored by tourism, recreation and resource developers such as mining and logging, who support freedom of access and enterprise. A spatial and political inversion has occurred: wild lands are now contained and surrounded by domestic lands as inter alia i.e land to be kept and maintained in a state of nature.6 Wilderness as raw, unruly Nature has been recast as an interior.

In a far more condensed time span, New Zealand has adopted all of these shifts in the notion of wilderness simultaneously. Boasting a stauncher bio-centric policy than the USA, its management of
The change from storm and winter to serene and mild weather, from dark and sluggish hours to bright and elastic ones, is a memorable crisis which all things proclaim. It is seemingly instantaneous at last. Suddenly an influx of light filled my house, though the evening was at hand, and the clouds of winter still overhung the eaves were dripping with sleety rain. I looked out the window, and lo! where yesterday was cold gray ice there lay the transparent pond already calm and full of hope as in a summer evening, reflecting a summer evening sky in its bosom, though none was visible overhead, as if it had intelligence with some remote horizon.

In contrast to this gentle pageantry of seasonal shifts, the magnitude of spatial forces enveloping New Zealand defies even the best forecasting methods. Weather is posited as the most variable and consistent characteristic of everyday life. As contemporary cultural theorists and landscape geographers argue as to the authenticity of New Zealand’s modern landscape, and government continues to sanction large tracts of land and ocean as reserve, weather appears to be the last bastion of wilderness (and a rogue one at that) to elude the grasp of regulation and management. Always present, New Zealand weather lingers, hovers, thrashes and deluges every scene as a high-pitched, dramatic performance.

**CALCULATED OBSERVATION**

Weather watching has developed a special strain of architecture that is remarkably similar to Thoreau’s cabin: small and often for solitary occupation, simple and often temporary, and always sited in order to maximise monitoring of the surrounds. As data collection stations, weather observatories are designed to obtain a true and accurate measure of the vicinity’s atmosphere using universally standard procedures.

The site chosen for exposing the outside instruments should be the most unrestricted area possible. An open space 300 or 400 feet square without buildings or trees and without large areas of concrete bordering the site...would afford the ideal location. To prevent rays of the sun from falling on thermometers used for air temperature measurements, a screen, or instrument shelter, is required. It should be placed near the center of a plot covered by short, level grass, with a minimum area of about 20 feet by 20 feet...The rain gage (sic) should be about 10 feet from the shelter. The plot should be in an area of level ground.

In this case, collecting quantitative data ranks more importantly than inhabitation and comfort: the area dedicated for weather watching in weather stations is small and unadorned. Technologically precise instruments detect cloud direction, cloud height, temperature, humidity, wind direction, wind speed, pressure and precipitation, while cloud types, states of visibility and definitions of hydrometers such as dry haze, damp haze, light fog, ice fog, smoke, dew, dust, frost and drifting
snow are qualitatively described and annotated through human observation. Read with a full-bodied vocabulary which includes clouds described as ‘heavily swelling’, ‘like waves of the sea’, ‘in the form of upward hooks ending in a little claw’, ‘sprouting’, the sky is figured as a stage.

There are occasions on which the sky is serene and the stage is empty, but generally there are clouds to be seen; they move, they change – all on business, with a purpose in their direction and behaviour. The whole stage is full of action, the action which carries on the life of the world; for clouds are the precursors or survivors of the rainfall upon which the world thrives.

Perhaps divulging meteorology’s latent prosaic tendency, Shaw’s metaphor is not a casual one: his weather watching occurred from within a weather station. A window frame served as the only hard-edged observational instrument to supplement qualitative interpretation, rather than calculating the local forces of wilderness.

WATCHING FROM WITHIN

Other forms of constructed interiors for observation in the wilderness include hunting and bird watching structures known as blinds, stands and hides. These structures occupy the landscape in an effort to blend in, provide cover from the elements and afford key opportunities for viewing prey.

A blind, used for hunting ducks, often consists as a woven mat of local plant material configured as a camouflage screen. It is frequently left open to the sky. A stand, typically used in hunting deer, is a makeshift perch for one person situated in a tree. While it does not offer much enclosure or area in which to move about, it provides exceptional overhead viewing while reducing the chance of detection by scent. Bound by minimal size, material and aesthetic considerations, each of these forms of observatory demonstrates a basic condition of an interior: to support the power of vision extending from the inside out.

Hides, on the other hand, sequester bird watchers in a fully enclosed interior space immersed within the environment. Usually roofed and fitted with seats for patient waiting, hides are often blended into the foliage by using materials gathered from the immediate site or paint colours approximating the local palette. A hide nestled into the grasses of a local New Zealand tidal inlet enunciates a slight shift in our weather-watching discussion. As a hide set apart from other dwellings, as a shelter from climate, and as a disguise that facilitates immersive observation, this hide suggests more than fortuitous viewing. It proposes interior occupation by a plague adorning its lintel which commemorates its founder, the accoutrements of its internal furnishings (latches, benches, ledges, ventilation flaps), and the smooth and oily surfaces demonstrating use – marred only by graffiti carved into the timber’s salt-leached patina. As such, it gives evidence of what J.R. Tolkien identifies as a ‘flet’, an archaic term referring to the inner part of a dwelling, a structure used to monitor border crossing activity by elves in Middle Earth.
The branches of the mallorn-tree grew out nearly straight from the trunk, and then swept upward; but near the top the main stem divided into a crown of many boughs, and among these they found that there had been built a wooden platform, or jet as such things were called in those days... 

In this paper, the term ‘jet’ signifies an interior constituted by the migration of atmosphere-forming weather and wilderness across the physical threshold between the The Great Outdoors and The Great Indoors. Two case studies articulate my call to consider interiors as climate-ridden environments inclusive of storm clouds. The first is an artist’s installation called Mendota Stoppages performed by James Turrell in the late 1960s. The second is a house at Morison Bush, Wairarapa, New Zealand, designed by architects Stuart Gardyne and Michael Bennett in 1997 for client Ray Labone.

LETTING IN

In the late 1960s, Turrell transformed an abandoned hotel in the small seaside town of Ocean Park, California, into a studio and exhibition space. In an effort to master the art of light projection, he painted over and covered all windows on the outside with gypsum board walls, insulated all spaces with acoustic deadening material, and surfaced everything in a pure white plaster finish. These efforts effectively severed all spatial and temporal ties between the inside and outside. Upon realizing that the external environment was an untapped resource of fine grades of light, Turrell set out to mine the interior space of the hotel as a spatial instrument. As a site-specific orchestration of temporal values, Mendota Stoppages existed as a progression of ten night spaces and two day spaces for either side of the 1970 equinox. A musical score was produced to annotate the performance to reflect small shifts in sunlight angles and light intensities. External events were filtered through apertures created in the body of the building and cast upon the walls, floors and ceilings surfaces.

Mendota Stoppages was significant because it was the first site-specific sensing space a space that responds to a space outside with a logic or consciousness formed by its look into that space. Also the visual qualities within such spaces— their density, grain, tone, sense of surface, and where vision lost its distinction of being 'out there' and 'in here'— were explored. Both of Turrell's biographers, Noeover and Adicko, credit the installation as a founding work of Turrell’s continuing re-conceptualisation of space as something that could be felt and generated by merely closing one's eyes. Mendota Stoppages lends credence to understanding interiors as vessels for receiving, observing and appreciating exterior environment, especially those spatial factors associated with weather. It highlights the manner in which interiors harbour a threshold weather in the form of raw nature being cajoled across the boundary and transformed by the process of falling upon an interior surface. In greater than visual terms, this suggests a tenuous awareness of weather demonstrated in such moments as waking in a flood of floral scent looming across a window sill; hearing the house shrink and paint blister as the day’s heat evaporates; being seduced by erotic sunsets streamed across the ceiling, or witnessing a fresh wind of 130 kilometres per hour throw a roof across the valley.

Turrell’s signature is an infusion of light around, upon and against a surface, such that the edge of what is concrete vapours. This poetic technique is reminiscent of the luminists, a group of late nineteenth century landscape painters known for inducing silence and stillness into a perfect, miniature universe that triggered monumentality through scale rather than size. As a sequence of scenes couched in spatial duration, Mendota Stoppages is an retro-re-conceptualisation of interior. More phenomenal than political, more sensual than technological, it is a work more intimate and immersive than a large glass window could possibly offer.

In contrast, the Labone Cabin is situated thirty metres above a river and oversees a full comprehension of native bush, river bed and farm land culminating in a panoramic view of the Tararu Mountains. (Figure 7) Such a privileged vantage point is facilitated by large expanses of horizontal window glass, a highly desirable feature in New Zealand houses, and when unencumbered by overt signs of civilization, a significant factor in real estate value. The cabin is a prime example of New Zealand’s general infatuation with the landscape as simply a view, a pleasurable indulgence while time and weather pass by As New Zealand meteorologist Erick Brettus speaks: “We are people of the sky. We live surrounded by the sky and we cushion ourselves from its effects with our clothes and houses.”

The Labone Cabin also exemplifies a general trait in New Zealand architecture to figure fractality over aesthetic exuberance. It represents a tendency to value the basic needs of shelter— protection from wind, rain, cold, earthquakes, tsunami, and drought— as the primary drivers for architectural form (Figure 8). Exterior and interior domains are often treated with the same aesthetic language uniformly applied in detail, scale and surface. In the case of the Labone Cabin, this aesthetic is driven by the cabin’s timber frame construction which regulates formal and spatial proportions, and, as the architect states, organises a layered sequence of interior experiences from the front façade (a fully open and vulnerable state) to the back wall made up of smaller, intimate and more secluded cells. (Figure 9) Stuart Gardyne, one of the cabin’s architects writes: “The cabin is both tree house and cave.”

The plan and section reveal the manner in which the cabin reduces the idea of ‘house’ to the essential need for shelter and refuge, the psychological comfort of the cave, as well as a desire for outlook— the sense of potential and possibility suggested by a wide view.” (Figure 10) This statement reveals a facet between weather and cabin beyond what W.G. Clark1 cites as the pervasive tendency to treat shelter as simply a bare necessity response to threat by Mother Nature and a knee jerk reaction of survival, where both models ignore underlying motives for pleasure, or even simple comfort. Like Thoreau, Gardyne is not writing with the ambivalent eye of the surveyor measuring the land with a theodolite, he is an interloper tracking a dramaturgy of climatic events in the context of daily life, an activity that rehares redemptive retreat as spiritual or emotional rejuvenation.

Given the cabin’s expansive view and its ubiquitous structural frame, several observations can be made. Because of its size and the economy of its internal planning in relation to the scale of the surrounding landscape, the cabin nearly forfeits an architectural exterior. The building envelope is a highly attenuated skeletal screen of minimal thickness, necessary to hold the roof down in gale force southerlies, and keep the house intact during lateral seismic movement. There is nothing extraordinary about the cabin’s form— in fact the architects call it a shed. Everything about this cabin features the sublime power of the surrounding environment and suggests that it is a transparent hide which blends into the wilderness by virtue of a minimal wall thickness that spatially distinguishes The Great Outdoors from The Great Indoors. Instead of mining the surroundings as seen in Mendota Stoppages, the Labone Cabin simply lets the outside in, perhaps as a refined form of camping in a sophisticated tent. As an instrument for providing basic living conveniences and an observatory within range of New Zealand's managed wilderness, it acquires a touristic form of occupation without the intent of working the land agriculturally or occupation through all seasons. I propose that it is an interior jet gauged to hunt and track, clouds, fog, haze and storms figured by wind and sunlight, and seize temporal possession of a never-ending drama that measures daily life, even if that life is in the form of a vacation get-away. As Gardyne indicates, it is a house to induce dreaming.

It is the architect’s mention of dreaming that tends hope of moving beyond the picturesque value of nature and wilderness towards an interior more akin to Thoreau’s musings on life, politics, culture and social custom. His cabin had but two windows, which, because of the quality of glass-making at the time, were less than crystal clear. His text implies that the door stood ajar except for the coldest of months letting in mice, bird song, and pungent aromas of the forest. This same door served to extend the interior by virtue of his daily walks. As his cabin afforded him protection from the elements, his writing afforded him time to scrutinise a state of affairs beyond the bounds of Walden. I do not mean to advocate Thoreau’s retreat or philosophy as a model for contemporary contemplation or development of
between indoors and outdoors, Jankovic reminds us that weather is a private and public condition, not a measurable entity.

One learns important things about the historical meanderings of meteorological interests if one sees them as related to social and somatic attitudes towards the weather as a milieu... Seeing the weather before it is assembled and appropriated as a subject of a shared discourse based on rational discussion and exchange of comparable data — as in some way a boundary object straddling conceptualizations — is like seeing a soil before it is cultivated. What is cultivated depends on the nature of the soil.26

Jankovic's investigation of intimate climates via medicine, health and social preconceptions around dampness, draughts, fresh and stagnant air is an inquiry on domestic atmosphere, a subject which he notes is marginally addressed in historical research. We possess no studies on bathroom monsoons, attic drizzles or the oven Scirocco.27 While Jankovic's essay paves the way for future study, it also suggests another form of weather-watching much more akin to John Ruskin's lecture, The Storm-cloud of the Nineteenth Century, which begins by dispelling any notion that there is an ulterior motive to his talk: he merely wishes to bring attention to a series of clouds unnoticed by meteorologists.

Cleverly wooing his audience of weather-watchers, Ruskin draws parallels between the familiar experience of mist as an aqueous vapour that blurs distinction between cloud types — and also social and political orders. For in this lecture, Ruskin seems to play out a metaphor that launches criticism of 'unfathomable truth' attributed to the physical sciences and his sense that a fragmented harmony was emerging between phenomena and learning through observation. Ruskin's storm-clouds are not merely gaseous volumes traversing the sky in a manner of everyday atmosphere-forming weather; they are signs of a world that is changing (in his terms) for the worse. While Jankovic's call for research on interior weather suggests a focus on the macro-climatic effects of moisture, heat and health in interiors — effectively an importation of weather-watching measures to the inside — Ruskin provokes an interpretation of weather that dismisses atmosphere as simply a passive consequence of climate-forming forces and redirects it towards an interior of self-reflection and critical engagement. His was a warning of ensuing environmental and political upheaval.28

So imagine yourself positioned in one of these Labone Cabin lounge chairs on any given day in New Zealand (or your own version of wilderness). (Figure 11) Envisage constructing a forecast. As you sit basking in the heat of the sun amplified by the glass, speculate upon what lies beyond the physical and temporal horizon that this perch nurtures. Will that sky be speckled by waves of military aircraft, noxious windborne insects, avian flu or tainted milk powder? Does the sky belie increasing global warming with greater colour saturation, much like the old northern hemisphere proverb: 'Red sky at night; shepherds delight. Red sky in the morning; shepherds warning.29
As the sun wanes and the wind forces you further into the cave’s depth, would you contemplate the consequence of the road and power lines being washed away and start collecting water from gurgling downspouts? And as you woke to Tui birds squabbling over cabbage tree seeds and flax blossoms, would your anxieties about rising unemployment and a devalued dollar be dispelled by a sense of well-being and comfort?

Herein lays the fullest sense of interior and wilderness as weather flits.

Note: I would like to acknowledge that an earlier form of this essay was originally delivered as a keynote lecture at the 2009 Atmospheres Symposium at the University of Manitoba, Winnipeg Canada. That symposium provided me with valuable insight in order to advance this essay into what it is here.

NOTES

4. Jackson, ‘Anthropophobia, or the Death of Landscape,’ 111.
7. Stills, Social and Ecological Manifestations in the Development of the Wilderness Area Concept in New Zealand, 3.
11. Henry David Thoreau, Walden, or Life in the Woods (New York: Thaves & Hudson, 1854), 243-244.
20. Peter Nowacek, ‘James Turrell The Other Horizon (Germany: Carta Verlag, 1999), 88.
31. Jankovic, Intimate Climates: From Skins to Street, Sensive to Societies, 3.

Figure 11: Interior weather-watching in the Labone Cabin. Photo © Paul McCredie.

Opposite