

'rO:Om', spatial and material transmissions

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Abstract: *Architecture's relation to landscape is often only recognised in its response to topography, views, access, orientation and apprehension of the built work's own exterior. As an object placed in an environment architecture is an artefact externally enhanced by vegetation as well as a container adorned by an interior. Such architecture relies on the subservience of its surrounding physical landscape and its internal hollows to define what is 'in' and what is 'out', 'here' and 'there'. Negotiation of these realms is determined by elements other than the dwelling body as a living, experiencing, cultural organism capable of navigating across formal spatial boundaries.*

This paper explores the architectural envelope as a porous medium informed by spatial and material transmissions between body and environment. This aqueous notion of inhabitation and material repositions architecture as the concurrence of interior and landscape whereby their localities are distinguishable within a continuum of particularised densities of matter accumulating and disintegrating over time. This theoretical and physical site is explored via the construction of a room.

Keywords: *landscape, room, matter*

preamble, before walking

This a polemic work directed towards mending the distance between thought and feelings, sense and sensation, body and environment. At the most, it is a supplementary musing to a set of images which themselves originate from a creative work. Completed more than a decade ago, this work remains an enigma. It delves into matters of existential angst and wonder, perhaps with a tinge of essentialism. And as a piece of creative research, its open-ended quality is held in check by its method of inquiry: full-scale construction.

Many architectural treatises outline very specific guidelines towards building in relation to geographical features or cultural rituals. Some recognise the site as a bounded political area. In other texts, it is a situated cultural event within the landscape environment. And, in spite of efforts to formally knit the interior with the landscape/the outside, the exterior, has always been set apart as distinct from the building proper, which has in turn, subsumed the interior.

This essay is directed away from the dichotomous/ didactic impulse. It builds upon a notion of space as a force constantly reforming matter where the architectural envelope transforms from a thin edged delimiting frame to an open valve and filter. As a passage of duration

and thickness, it engages the properties of threshold and instead of occupying the status of object, the architecture becomes a facilitator. The creative work depicted in this essay sought to dissolve the idea of 'between' that binds body, building and site as a classical tripartite relation into a fluid dynamic matrix. Between-ness escapes operating as an intermediary, an insertion, a limbo, nothingness or void, and in their absence, hosts multifarious spatial exchange. Discreteness is abandoned for the sake of non-objectivity. Body and place, inhabitant and landscape are all viscera – they are all insides. Here, the aqueous nature of matter reaches such a degree of porosity in all directions that the architecture, the classical boundary of wall, fence or hedge is but a sieve for spatial ingestion and digestion. The architecture constitutes a riparian edge, where the definitions of what is wet or dry, hard or soft, and in or out, are but temporal molecular convergences – spatial and material transmissions. The inhabiting body slips between the pinched points of the grammatical colon, from 'o' to 'o', casually gathering and disseminating, contaminating and cultivating the environment as a unified territory, in order to make 'room'.

dry wetness

The desert is a place that demands your full attention. Many writers, artists, and scientists have documented how it tests survival skills, how it exposes what is taken for granted, how it measures preconceptions about earthly existence and how it makes small, seemingly insignificant details, a matter of life and death. So, when one ventures out into the desert with just the education of an architect, it is no small wonder that the focus of the experience is the relation between body and site. The necessity for physical shelter promptly overrides aesthetic concerns. Something innately human takes over as if there is some kind of biological narrative embedded within our body mass that stores secrets of how to create shade, collect water, store provisions and eventually find comfort. The severity of desert conditions instigates this hidden knowledge to be perspired. Far from barren, the desert provokes vitality, not of the decadent, flamboyant sort but of the miserly, economic and seriously ingenious type.

The desert is constituted by various sets of extremes, poles not in opposition but in dancing conflation. The greatest of all is the presence or illusion of water. At one point in his book, *Desert Notes*, Barry Hulston Lopez succinctly states the condition of spatial immediacy that the room construction sought to capture: A man drives out into the desert. He stops his vehicle and after removing all but his shoes he starts to walk towards a hot spring ...

He removes his shoes. He lay on his back in the hot water, his toes grazing the shallow, sandy bottom of the pool. He could hear the water lapping at the entrance to his ears,

the weight of water pulling on his hair; he could feel the particles of dust falling off his flesh, floating down, settling on the bottom of the pool; he could feel the water prying at the layers of dried sweat breaking away from his body. The tips of his fingers wrinkled, and he stared at the water pooling in the cavity of his chest and falling away as he breathed. ...He climbed out of the pool... When his feet were dry he could put on only the linen socks and left. He could feel the wind eddying up around him like a cloak and his feet barely touched the ground. His eyes felt smoother in their sockets and he could tell, without looking, how his fingers were curled; he could see the muscles of his legs tied behind his kneecaps, feel the patella gliding over the knot. He felt the muscles anchored on the broad, flat plate of his hipbones and the wind soft deep in the roots of his hair. He felt the pressure of his parting the air as he walked (Lopez, 1976, pp. 11–12).

Wet and dry, hot and cool relinquish their oppositional trappings. A body is immersed simultaneously in material environment and perceptual consciousness. The defining line between site and inhabitant starts to blur, even if metaphorically through the narrative of soaking in water. The landscape becomes a body and the body becomes a landscape, only differentiated by topographic surface explorations (Figure 1).

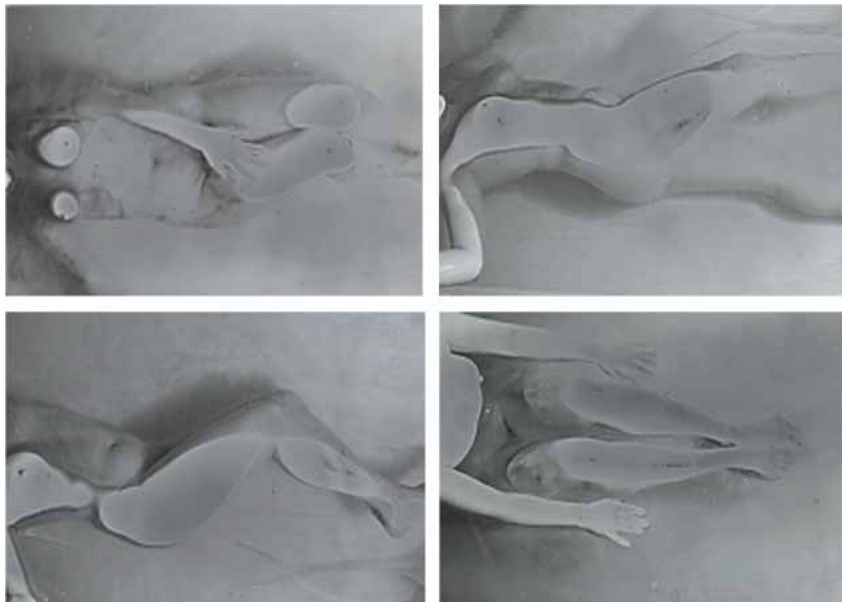


Figure 1. Topographic land/bodies.

softened hardness

J.G. Ballard forces the merging of landscape and body in *The Drowned World*, sited in the flood waters of global environmental catastrophe (Ballard, 1962). The process of literally and psychologically becoming one with the land, or the water, is played out amongst the characters as they deny the inevitable despite their scientific expertise. As a testament to the modern phrase 'all that is solid melts into air' (Berman, 1988, p. 53), Ballard signals a lapse in ideals of stability and certainty. The divers find architectural monuments rusting beneath the surface of the lagoons as quickly as their bodies are being absorbed by dreams. The spatial continuity provided by fathoms of water erodes material substance as it fosters the growth of algae, barnacles, fish and crustaceans, each with bodies adapted to separating the oxygen molecules from the hydrogen and each well-suited to a viscous sense of gravity. Just as the desert is composed by a collection of parched bits of hard geological matter, the lagoon is made up of thriving but fermenting compost. Both of these fictional sites exert threats and promises of life and death. whereby delineations of inside and outside are muted. As Illich writes,

The water that we have set out to examine is just as difficult to grasp as space. It is, of course, not the H₂O produced by burning gases nor the liquid that is metered and distributed by authorities. The water we seek is the fluid that drenches the inner and outer spaces of the imagination. More tangible than space, it is even more elusive for two reasons: first, because this water has nearly unlimited ability to carry metaphors and second, because water, even more subtly than space, always possesses two sides (Illich, 1985, p. 24).

With all respect towards Illich's work, two sides are simply not enough. Two-ness is part and parcel to the condition of between-ness from which this work diverts. It does not accommodate the multiplicity of meaning construction or spatial perception documented in Illich's search for the 'historicity of stuff' – water, rock, plateaus, armoires, wallpaper, flesh included (Figure 2). They are complex cultural ecosystems.

far beyond the dew point

This project presents a form of spatial practice whereby the physical properties of matter as substance and the conceptual qualities of the immaterial, such as ether, are cast within architecture's relation to philosophy and its practice of making space (McMullin, 1963, pp. 1–12). At the end of his fourth metabletic reflection, van den Berg casts a cloud over knowing as something definitive and secure. Throughout his essays he observes the



Figure 2. INOUT diagrams.

phenomena of things in a curious mix of acceptance and doubt of scientific fact. All that he witnesses seems to contradict what he has learned. Somewhere within his uncertainty he accepts that conditions are relative and relational along a shifting continuum of time and material:

So I must ask myself: what am I doing when I walk around on the earth in my daily life? Do I rightly view my world as not having barriers or have I been carefully trained to deny barriers? Am I free or only careless? Is the world I know uniform, everywhere and not the same everywhere? Is the space around me full, equally occupied by points everywhere? Or is that space not full but broken, open, discontinuous? Does the world have pores, splits, holes? I wouldn't dare to answer in the negative (van den Berg, 1970, p. 125).

Van den Berg comes to grip with the dual nature of metaphor to conceptually re-present and empirically illustrate a process which closely approximates research through design, or in the case of the rO:Om project, material research.

transmissions

The following images document the process of constructing the room. A single-reflex 35mm camera loaded with forty-frames of black and white film was hung in a trapeze of elastic straps above the studio. Over a period of approximately twenty eight days, a picture was taken once a day using an extension device. Such a recording method denied

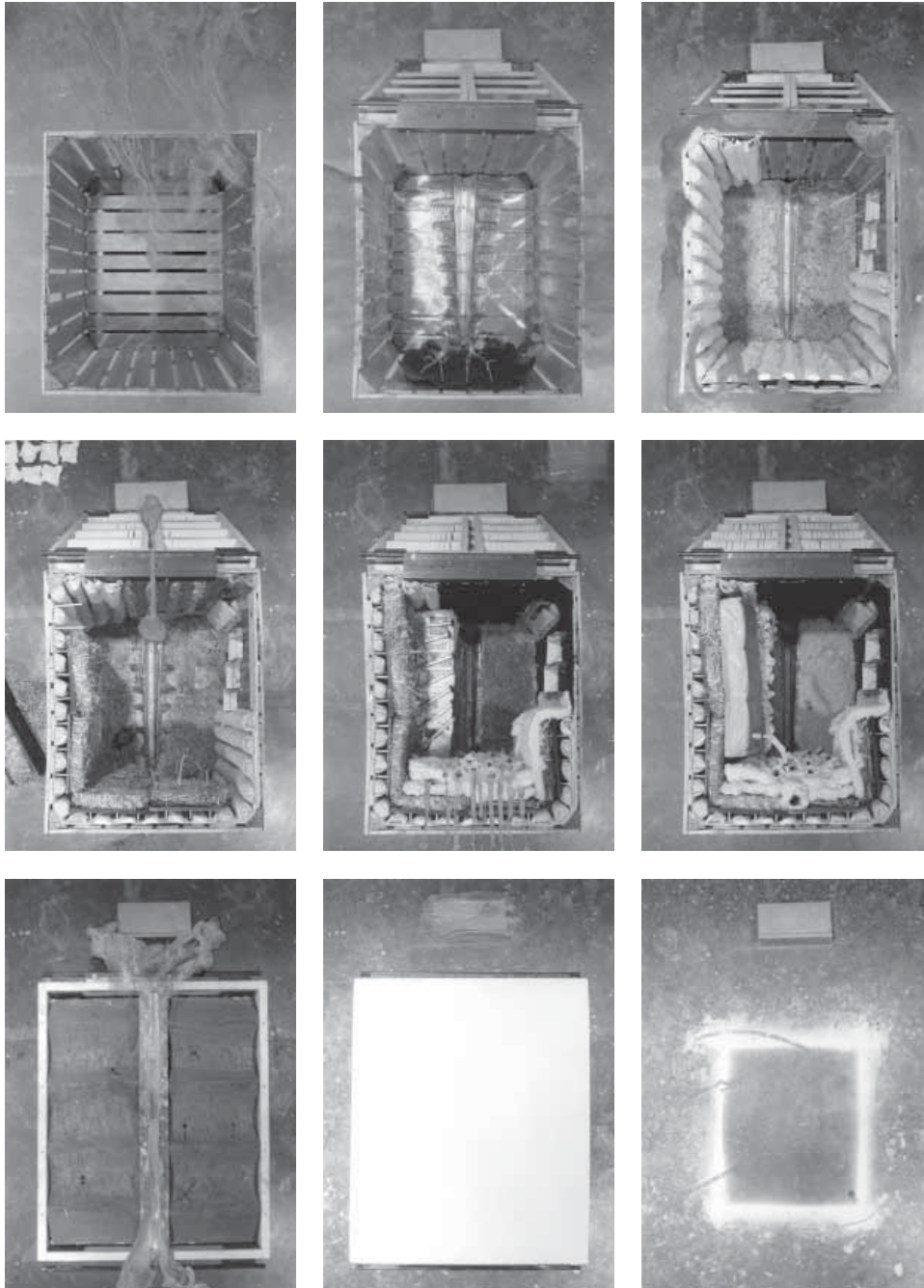


Figure 3. Progress images of construction sequence.

visual apprehension of the work below and therefore avoided preconceptions about form, proportion and mass to intervene. At the end of the construction process selected negatives were printed onto 16 x 20 inch photographic paper (Figure 3). The single eye of the camera recorded the following:

A fruit crate, approximately 60" long x 48" wide x 48" high, is transported across the Canadian border to a warehouse studio. Every board is warped and bowed from the weight of past cargos and all surfaces bear pungent stains. It reeks and it leaks. Good for firewood.

As a full but hollow artefact it commemorates its agricultural heritage and its role in an industrial process of shifting goods around the globe to accommodate free-trade and culinary desires. Its crude, practical and modest state references many spatial and political sites. A set of wheels is added to the crate to symbolise and facilitate its former and future mobility.

Its sides are too high to crawl over but the inside space is big enough to sit down. A concrete stoop stabilises a ladder hinged to one side, whose pivot allows the ladder to become a trellised roof to the open top face. Getting in requires going up and then down, fetching this, cutting that, a sequence frequently repeated in the process of establishing site.

The furrows of fields that once grew the produce conspire to form an interior surface of irrigation and urination, both currents of fluid that cross between landscape and interior rooms. The moulded copper sheet deflects the waste to the perimeter where it is collected in blown glass test tubes under the 'skirt' of the crate.

The slatted timber sides are more like balustrades than screen and therefore do not provide adequate privacy for previously mentioned eliminations. Nor do they deflect the draughts of cold air coming off the surface of the Great Lakes and under the studio door. A curtain is fashioned from the symbol of architectural wall insulation to defend the inhabitant, its folds filled with sawdust. As a thermal conductor of the best sort, the copper pan is cold from the undercurrents. Shredded paper forms a carpet across the copper terrain, now green from liquid accretions. Both operations serve to dampen sound in the room and muffle the noise of the studio environment.

Much like the desert air in the heat of the day, they also stifle the flow of air necessary for breathing. A vertical field of latex tubes is planted along the side closest to the studio air vent with an inhalation mask at its end. In threat of suffocation, these masks would serve as ventilating gills and one's face would be drawn to the wall to breathe.

And as the above transmissions start to accumulate there are moments to simply ponder programmatic necessities of inhabitation. Ledges lit by the end-grain of sheet glass serve a collection of insignificant bits picked up off the workshop and forest floors. Far from an altar, the sacred and the profane seem fused in this transmission.

The room assumes a limited state of density. More time is spent reflecting than building. And as such, creature comforts instigate the walls to thicken. Wainscoting made of beeswax and straw line the room against the increasing sub-zero temperatures that creep up through the concrete slab when the boilers go hay-wire. Malt whiskey fills a radiator-like device made of clear tubing folded and fastened to form a comfortable back rest complete with sipping straw. The rungs of the ladder, in-filled with cotton strapping, modify the sharp light and irritating buzz of the fluorescent fixtures above.

The impetus to move inside includes the need to store things. Preservation and conservation occurs in the form of twelve mason jars, each one slipped into stacks of laminated newspapers. A radius of ocular sights is installed on the outside surface of the crate and through the growing wall thickness to the privileged seat of occupation. There is a sense that the stash and treasures require defending. However, the sighting device proves to be a better listening device.

A leak develops in the warehouse roof when the winter snow thawed. The cotton straps serve as a suitable substrate for a light weight concrete. Collecting water in a latex vessel lined with foam rubber seems like a clever idea. However, with the lid shut, the slow absorption of drips accentuates the room as coffin than sanctuary.

The space of the museum exhibition calls. The exterior surface of this constructed room assumes a camouflage by the likes of gypsum board, plaster and white paint. This room would hide in the museum and pretend to be a non-object, a thick wall or stubby plinth upon which to display other stuff. Its secrets of landscape and interior and all its messy and un-aesthetic vulgarities would be secure within the walls of the over-riding authority. The dust of sanded plaster fills the air and chokes the lungs.

The room is wheeled up the road through the gates to the museum gallery space. The concrete stoop serves as head stone to an accumulative and additive process. A drawing of plaster dust honest to the weeks of making lingers on the concrete floor in the absence of the actual room construction.

the out of in

The critic wrote:

In the work entitled 'rO:Om', the in-between is enfolded within a 'neutral' container, its complexities and densities belied by the white space of the geometrically determined volume. This rupture between the inside and the outside forces a questioning of the abstraction of the white surface. Is it simply a mask for all that is not included in the abstraction? Or is it the final reduction of all that could be inside? The linings of the room accumulate to the point that they suffocate the space that would be inside, in this case a reduction occasioned by a fecund, stifling growth. The troubling aspect of the opposition between the inside and outside of the box and their lack of symmetry opens up a possibility for further questioning of this issue in architecture. Today's walls have been thinned to the point that no interior can exist within them, materially or conceptually. This dis-appearance of the interior (compared to the monolithic section of a masonry wall) is symptomatic of all that is hidden behind appearances today, all the 'functional' layers of a wall section that resist the abstractions and reductions that are possible in the flatness of paint on a flat surface. The opening of the box/ room begs the question of the interior. I am certain that with enough time, viscera within will stain the surface, polluting the opposition in the work and rendering it into a space of in-between (Hoffman, 1990) (Figure 4).

A fairly astute critique if only the notion of oppositions was intended to structure the making of the room. One needed to go inside the room rather than rely on an external reading of the object.



Figure 4. Gallery installation.

even deeper matter(s)

Central to the ideas of space and material presented here, Arup Stroll illuminates a proposition on the nature of surface as a condition of unlimited boundary (Stroll, 1988). The Somorjai concept of surface is considered as the aggregation of molecules approaching a limit, which, in mathematical terms, is an unattainable point of convergence based on principles of divisibility. Things just get thinner and thinner until they start thickening again as another concentration of material and entity. Questions of homogeneity are averted by the inherent complexity of molecules making up spatial matter – complexities he has named as kinks, bumps, and pits – names that frequently appear to be describing landscape formations such as terraces, plateaus and air: water interfaces. While Stroll valiantly presents sophisticated ideas on the philosophy of surface, in the end his discussions are bound to metaphors reliant upon the attributes of material and its manipulation. He writes, 'These operations are, if not identical with, at least analogous to those that nonscientists perform on macroscopic objects – say, when one, using a damp rag, wipes the dust off a table' (Stroll, 1988, p. 57). And as such, these examples make the concept accessible to those whose hands are more adept than their ability to think abstractly and to those whose practice involves the transference of ideas through stuff. Through Stroll's speculations, space as provocateur of infinite collection of unbounded and suspended particles seems plausible. That architecture is one of those surfaces, a densification of (c)rusty coarse grains through which fine silts of interior and landscape filter and occasionally settle to form room – this all seems possible.

white light, the last site

The room construction was predominantly made of dry and flammable materials selected for their resonance to the desert and their repulsion to water. For the most part, materials were manipulated and processed with an effort to imbue them with air, to whip them up, therefore increasing their volume via the introduction of air pockets; smaller microscopic rooms. While the conventional space of the room's interior was exhausted because no more space remained for the body to move, this produced a stifling fear that the space would spontaneously enfold and collapse and combust. To vacate was to escape.

It was a timely move. With no home of my own and no place to store this construction, it was transported one last time to a field where rubbish and materials are stored and disposed. It snowed profusely in the first days of the New Year and despite the damp cold, it only took one match to set the room ablaze. (Figure 5) All of the small air pockets sucked and

gasped. The heat drew dark distraught figures on the white museum-like surfaces. The room harboured by the willow trees and a low bank of grey clouds glowed and crackled violently when the flames penetrated through the volatile layers of sawdust, wax and whiskey. Four hours later the room lay in an exhausted heap of homogenous ashes, just waiting for the next gust of wind to enhance their spatiality and extend their life.



Figure 5. Burn site.

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Credits

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