Matter of the manor  
A visual essay

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ABSTRACT

Buildings decay and mutate; they are made of hybrid assemblages of material sourced from near and far, “…emergent mosaics of various temporalities, collages of matter characterised by an incessant becoming”.¹ We are interested in the “continuity of process - that is with the perdurance or life expectancy of a thing, or how long it can be kept going”.² This thinking supports us to shift away from a reading of historic buildings as objects analogous to documents inscribed with fixed histories to one where space, time, materials and people are intertwined in an unfolding process. We are interested in matter as material as affective particles, atmospheres, spectral traces, gestures and actions.

We are interested in the disciplinary territory that lies in the overlap between interior design and conservation practice by focusing on ways of conceptualising historic interiors as unfinished sites of experience that are loaded with affective capacity. The research aims to examine the representation of space from the inside out, through explorations of interiority and embodied practices and how we can rethink historic interiors. Taking the form of collages, our design work uses an uninhabited 16th-century timber-framed manor house as a case study. Here we propose that the house is experienced all the more poignantly as it hangs in a transitional state prior to any programme of restoration and reuse that aspires to implement a unifying scheme leading to a static end point.

FORWARDS

We work as an interdisciplinary team made up of an interior designer and a historic building conservationist interested in the overlaps and divergences in our disciplinary perspectives. Our concern is with what Juhani Pallasmaa refers to as the “forceful emotional engagement” of historic settings as subjective experiences.³ Orthodox approaches to understanding historic buildings conceptualise them as documents with narratives and chronologies waiting to be discovered through objective analysis. Historic England advises that we observe a building “in order to ascertain what information it provides about its origins, form, function, date and development”.⁴ This says little about the human encounter with the building in the here and now and how it stirs the senses, the emotions and the imagination.

Since the 1970s, conservation doctrine has embraced the notion that the heritage value of a place is a cultural construction rather than an absolute truth which is intrinsic to the heritage object.⁵ The Burra Charter adopted by ICOMOS Australia in 1979 enshrined the principle that conservation decisions should acknowledge multivalent and subjective heritage values. This principle was widely taken up in national policies and guidance across the globe.⁶ What matters is how communities and individuals make meanings and attachments with historic places. However, these subjective meanings are inherently difficult to articulate and to capture in textual language. The required professional tools and vocabularies are lacking. There is a tendency to privilege empirically-defined and documented tangible historical truths that revert to more orthodox conservation traditions based on specialist knowledge of material fabric and academically-described historic importance.⁷
For the designer, architectural processes and practices tend to focus on the form and function of a building and architecture as a solid object. Architecture is often represented as a bounded artefact frozen in time through the use of perspectival images in the form of photographic representation and linear drawings which do not represent how they are, have been or will be inhabited. Buildings are drawn untouched by the passing of history. “Architectural space”, writes Jeremy Till, “… is emptied of all considerations of time and is seen as a formal and aesthetic object.” Conceptualising architecture as an assemblage shifts away from this static position and allows for engagement with issues of interiority and the temporal; “an architecture of assembling and dissolving and how elements of a building infold and unfold with each other to the point of distinction.”

The approach we take is archaeological. It maps presence through the topology of the surface and the finds beneath it. We practice the unfolding of space and time through mapping material relationships experienced in the present. Inspired by New Materialist thinking, both building and body are understood as living material, as Jane Bennett speaks, as matter: “[T]he sentences of this book also emerged from the confederate agency of many striving macro- and microactants: from ‘my’ memories, intentions, contentions, intestinal bacteria, eyeglasses, and blood sugar, as well as from the plastic computer keyboard, the bird song from the open window, or the particulates in the room.”

Our method of working is experimental and we draw on Jane Rendell’s Site Writings, her use of pronouns and multiple readings of family objects. In this work Rendell explores the use of subjective and objective writing and the relationship of the photographic image to text as a way to activate traces of lived experience in the history of Architecture and its language. We also engage with the work of embodied practitioners in the field of performance such as Miranda Tuffnell and Chris Crikmay. This situates our practice in lived experiences where the material of bodies, personal and pre-personal memories, shifting positions and gestures are used as a material paste to create poetised images. In this way we break from the formal structures and processes we would normally use to investigate a historic site where it is read as documentary evidence viewed from an objective distance. We move from the comfort of our disciplinary norms to allow the free flow of our imaginations and the unfolding of our embodied experiences.

We investigate these embodied methods of representation in a case study of Wymering Manor located in Cosham, Hampshire, UK, abandoned since 2006. Originally constructed in 1581/2, the Manor has been used as a home, a religious school and in later years, a youth hostel. During alterations made in the 1780s, an elegant double-height bow window was added to the west facade, cutting through the massive timbers holding the building up. The weakened frame eventually gave way causing the ceilings to collapse in the north-west corner. Attempts to repair the frame over the years failed and the Manor was eventually vacated leaving its future uncertain. Fearing its loss, in 2013 the local community formed a preservation trust which included local politicians, historians, residents and business people. They bought the Manor for a nominal sum from Portsmouth City Council and assumed responsibility for its care.

Wymering Manor is now in a state of transition and its remaking is taking place slowly and organically; it is being reshaped through the desires, gestures and actions of local people rather than the intentions of a fixed plan and known aesthetic outcome designed to secure its future once and for all. It is this liminality that draws us to the Manor. Referencing the New Materialist work of Jane Bennett, we employ creative writing processes and the viewfinder of a small Nikon Coolpix camera to
explore our perceptions of its interior. We write and draw ourselves into the spaces through shifting our positions, from I, to you, to we, as a provocation to our disciplinary assumptions about old buildings.

UNFOLDING TIME

We were first captivated by the Manor because it is a wonderful assemblage that has no clear chronological narrative. Architectural elements are borrowed from elsewhere: some from a Palladian mansion called Bold Hall near St Helen’s in Lancashire, staircases perhaps from a Jacobean manor, and fabric in the cellars and chimneystack reused from an earlier building. Records exist in fragments in the form of faded photos, documents and handwritten family letters that are held by the Trustees, but they cannot tell the whole story. What may be the original front door into the Manor is now a feature in a room known as the Dining Room, which also once functioned as the library. This door goes nowhere; it is blocked on the outside and cannot be opened. As a youth hostel, the rooms were turned into dormitories, old doors were labelled with room numbers and fire evacuation notices, and modern toilets and showers were added.

Now new material relations are appearing through the interactions of the community as they search for a future for the house. Donated furniture from different eras has been staged throughout its rooms and the main hall has a small gate-legged Victorian table set with a lace mat, glass vase and a Jane Austen book. These still lives begin to suggest new narratives and connections: Jane Austen's brother, Francis Austen, was a churchwarden at the neighbouring church and is buried in the churchyard, although there is no record Jane ever visited the house. Furniture and props introduced by event companies called Dark Encounters and Torchlight Heritage for Agatha Christie plays and ghost tours include mock Tudor confessional boxes and medieval pillories that suggest new ways for visitors to imagine these spaces. Stacked chairs await audiences, pianos anticipate rooms filled with music, fluffy paint rollers look forward to freshly coating the flaking walls. These new materials are a manifestation of community desires and longings and the diverse motivations of its new owners and volunteers.

The images and writing that we present in the first part of this paper sketch scenes in the unfolding story of the Manor. Each signals a dream world in the making where material assemblages express the longings of the people trying to save it. These drawings capture the community’s optimism for the continuity of the Manor; they act as an architectural type, a cohesive material structure and perhaps an artefact documenting an accumulation of installations operating as compositional events, “as a gathering place of accumulated deposits which depend on the dense entanglement of affect, attention, the senses and matter”.14

These scenes are in continuous motion as shifting actions constantly set up new material and social relations and clusters of affects. They represent moments in the thick time of the Manor as it moves on its uncertain trajectory, capturing “a present that gathers the past and holds the future pregnantly, but not in an easy, linear manner”.15 Through these tangles of material relations we see that the house has the power to affect and to be affected in multiple ways, they act as haecceities “of relations of movement and rest between molecules or particles”.16 They are compositions that resonate with the diverse co-existing desires of the community, scenes which are replete with unresolved possibilities and threats. The Music Room changes each time we visit from a scene reminiscent of an Agatha Christie Murder Mystery, to an actor’s changing room, to an exhibition space for community visits. Yet decay and imminent collapse are ever present, fresh scatters of fallen plaster on
the carpet, spreading stains of damp on the walls, old mortise joints in the timbers slowly parting under the strain.

We build the affective qualities of our images and text over time, embedding our experiences, memories and conversations into their making. We grow dialogues between ourselves and the space, allowing our responses and imaginings to unfold outside of our disciplinary gestures. Our work shifts towards a formative language where we use the material of our bodies, the staging of the house and its atmospheres to shape our conversations and an undirected outcome free of formal structures and methodologies. This process challenged our disciplinary habits and professional vocabularies and compelled us to be more open to gestures of the local community.

*Insert complex images: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, in pairs as double page spreads.*
Scene One: Music Room

Props: 6 upholstered chairs, mainly Regency and Victorian, covered in velvet and striped fabric. 5 tables, 2 dining and 3 side tables, candlesticks, 2 chandeliers. 5 wine glasses and 2 decanters. 6 foot lined display boards in scarlet red and dark brown, with black metal frames. Thin velour curtains. Smooth white walls. A slimly lit room.

We sit opposite each other exchanging words, sliding a piece of paper across the thin grain of a varnished, dining table. Around us the trustees of the house are getting ready for an open weekend. Our voices are hushed.

I am lying beneath your feet.

We talk with Ben, who’s now one of the caretakers of the manor, about photographs of the house.

"Do you know where the originals are?" we ask.

It was a simple request and we didn’t necessarily expect a reply. But without hesitation, he answers.

"Yes, I have them, locked away in a cupboard", and in that instant Ben went to off to retrieve them.

He reappeared with a blue, plastic folder containing letters and family photographs taken by past owners of the house.

I used to have a very special friend, a rare hand-painted rug. I created beneath the carpet. And my soul was3 resounded with understanding, with being and music and conversation that once filled the room.

We walked through plastic pockets taking out small pieces of mounting card that were stained brown in their folds like grain of images now failing but showing us fragments of the house’s past. These fragile surfaces offered a glimpse into the manor as a home; they ravished intimate family moments, hands and eyes not seen through drawings and photographs already in our possession. The touch of these documents brought absent things to mind, and we found ourselves shuttling between past and present.

You sit holding the space. You were here but suddenly you vanished and learned forever. The house of the city, living here, scattered with copies and the 20th century of furniture and such. Through a long, black hole, inside your home.

We linger in the Music Room, watching Ben and Mark, another trustee as they gather an assortment of Regency, Victorian and contemporary chairs and tables ready for an open weekend. They too are curious about the house and the whispers that echo from its fabric; we are all like detectives assigning a crime scene, biologically assuming to understand its story in a space where memory and time slip and new fragments emerge.

You see behind a bland window, broken shutters like cutouts, district of trees, the walls knocking through the windows. Try to make a sketch. The sketch, the sketch, in the sketch, the sketch, then the sketch, a sketch. Interior, white sheet, black walls, black walls, black walls, black walls, black walls.

"We are holding a murder mystery this weekend. Would you like to come and find out how Mr Black died?" asks Mark.

We are tempted and think about the stories of the props shown around the house that make false narratives: we are sure Mr Black to have an eventful death. We must ask the meaning of his death and diagramming these new events, and yet these mystery clues are now breathing new life into the Manor’s story.

If you could speak, could you tell us whether this room was once a chapel? When was the ceiling added? And the tops of the windows hidden in the attic?

Set: June 8, 2017
Mark: Mr. Blanchard
Time: 7 PM
Place: Music Room, Wyrmington Manor

Drawn by: BM/KF
Scene Two: The Drawing Room

Props: A worn leather chair with round cylindrical black legs. Stacked office chairs, 8 red felt display boards. A flat leather, Scotch tape. Timbers piled, earth floor, plant mounds and tables, clattery boxes, bread, windows and opened. Modest small.

We stand at the door of the room looking in, uncertain about entering. The space is in disorder. Timbers are piled up and the scent of decay heavy in the air. Furniture has been stored making access almost impossible. It's a浏览 to get to...

I am close to the computer plan. With superfine, blue printed, thin blue lines, I am tracing the points that shaped our many walks past the door. I am tracing the name I killed, the names I sought; the names I faced. I am laying the thin blue lines on the floor to make a map. I am walking in the room, stepping on the thin blue lines. I am walking in the room, stepping on the thin blue lines.

The first rhythm to me, the second pressure. You are speaking, words of a song playing through my head. You are speaking, words of a song playing through my head. You are speaking, words of a song playing through my head.

Stepping down from the floorboards, the room's sound strange, like being inside and inside at the same time. Archaeologically, it reveals an assemblage of materials and accoutrements, timer bottles, plastic cups, and pieces of cloth. Composted earth, fragments of timber, and new plant growth lies beneath the floorboards suggesting other lives of the house.

Because if you pull out and turn, anywhere, the past still exists behind the thin blue lines of the computer plan. You are tracing, building a different world. The thin blue lines are not just a line on the floor. They are a line of history and change. You are tracing, building a different world.

If you pull out and turn, anywhere, the past still exists behind the thin blue lines. You are tracing, building a different world. You are tracing, building a different world.

You are speaking, words of a song playing through my head. You are speaking, words of a song playing through my head. You are speaking, words of a song playing through my head.

We decide that might happen to the old images piled up on the floor, even now shifting and shifting and shifting. We know that it isn't the end.

We are here to prep the frame, a canvas, and make art as it is. The traced images are pasted to the glass frames. We are making art. We are making art. We are making art.

The question of what will happen to the floorboards is irrelevant. When they were taken in a way, but they were changed and moved because of their age. They were changed and moved because of their age. They were changed and moved because of their age.

The inscription between the inside and outside disposes. The house is an organic thing, its materials covered with the seasons and the seasons. It is a single, single, single moment. It is a single, single, single moment.
Scene Three: The Refectory.

Props: Brushes, paint, paint rollers, painting unit, debris from the decayed toilets, sinks, a tool box, suspended ceiling paper hung, bolder, flashing paint on the walls.

A notice pinned to the door saying:

NO MORE SPACE. FULL WILL HELP.

You see the burning chimney breast which once dominated this room but now you are surrounded by all the books and accumulated rubbish that has been so swallowed up by the void and become so cluttered that you are almost swallowed.

From above a stone plaque on the chimney breast reads:

"A small leak will sink a big ship"

And the family motto is a constant refrain:

"Amus, amus, la vita e bella."

We stand looking up at you and want to find the rest of you we want to find what has been partly hidden behind the painted partitions and ceiling.

We enjoy the juxtaposition between the frescoes and the painted walls which are the remnants of its recent past as a youth hostel. We wonder whether the changing of household goods in the room stops it from being renewed or valued?

We are surrounded by stainless steel sinks, cupboards and cabinets from which this was the kitchen for the youth hostel. Mr Metcalfe, a previous owner and an inventor, used it as his motor garage. The room has had an odd mix of uses over time: a laboratory, garage, storeroom, and workshop.

The poetry of the space lies in the old photograph pinned to the chimney breast; it acts as an imaginative prompt and makes you wonder what it could be again.

This space is now used as a repair workshop. Domestic tools donated by local residents and paint from Dulux bright white emulsion to clean up the house to make it presentable for the public. The bright and sunny pastel wallpaper and slate 1920's tiles add an uncertain honesty charm.

Silt. Stip: Wyomiing Cowboys, old Wyoming Band.

Draft: BM/KJ

Date: May 5, 1979

Art from a former life, naming haiku, etchik, ake poem.
AFTERWORDS

In this work we set out to experiment with new methodologies for our practice to investigate tools with which to express the affective capacities of historic interiors. An embodied approach gives historic ‘fabric’ a more dynamic and agentic role, defining materiality by what it does rather than by what it is. The drawings we created through image and text gave voice to the house, we created a gestalt, a story of the many voices of the human and non-human actants at the Manor.

Our writing enabled us to see differently in spaces that became familiar, challenged our prejudices and the gestures we make unthinkingly from years of practice. The images that we first took were unthinking, we stood on the thresholds taking photographs as site notes, aide-memoires as documentary evidence to take back to the office/studio. The process of creative writing invited an engagement to be in, “sitting in”, “drawing in” the details of the scenes around us and of our bodily sensations. Our photographic positioning shifted from the threshold to sitting in the space to draw an archaeology of presence, of ourselves within the surroundings.

The process required us to let go of disciplinary assumptions about authenticity, significance, the science of decay and aesthetics. These receded in importance as we opened ourselves to the gestures of the community and their desires for what the house might be. The slow process of settling into the house and participation in ongoing acts of community engagement allowed subjective meanings and attachments to reveal themselves over time. The ad-hoc repairs, paint colours and imported furnishings, storytelling, the staging of interiors, event-making, and the introduction of modern facilities, all reflect a complex process of looking after the Manor which does not necessarily adhere to the norms of conservation and interior practice. The lack of resources pulls the community into the house to care for it themselves. Their longings and desires are evident in these unfolding actions and the choices and priorities which emanate from their own conversations with its matter.

New Materialist thinking and creative processes supported us to think in terms of clusters of relationships, entanglements of affect, people and objects and to question our normative values when working in historic settings. At Wymering we engaged with the material matter of the Manor through its life history, its ongoing ecologies, its perdurance and imagined futures. Our images and text create new visual and verbal languages of the site and of its materialities that can be embedded into practice. Space and time are folded together with the contortions of our bodies, of the house, and its communities as we create tactile and poetised representations of its interior. We will continue working between creative writing and photographic drawing to collect the multiple voices at Wymering as it moves on its uncertain trajectory, to add these methods to our professional toolkits and to contribute these insights to ongoing conversations about the future of the Manor.

Biographies:

Belinda Mitchell is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Portsmouth, School of Architecture, where she co-ordinates masters programmes taught in an interdisciplinary environment; Interior Design, Historic Building Conservation and Sustainable Cities. Her teaching and visual art practices take place through collaborative and interdisciplinary processes that are focused around drawing and embodied methodologies. Recent exhibitions include, Sites of Exchange: materialising conversations, University of Portsmouth, 2014; Making Conversation,
as part of Situation, RMIT University, 2014; Sites of Conversation, a group exhibition and symposium at Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton, 2017.

Dr Karen Fielder is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Portsmouth, School of Architecture, where she leads the MSc in Historic Building Conservation. She has a Doctorate in history awarded by the University of Southampton in 2012, funded by an AHRC collaborative doctoral studentship with the National Trust. Her research interests include past and present approaches to altering historic buildings, and the experiential and sensory qualities of historic places.

We would like to thank The Wymering Manor Trust and Janet Hird for their support and engagement with the project and its on going development. We would also like to thank Julieanna Preston for her insight and critical comments that have supported the development of the text and complex images.

NOTES


