

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.

FORWORDS

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."⁸ 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".⁹

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".¹⁰

Our method of working is experimental and we draw on Jane Rendell's *Site Writings*¹¹, 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.¹² 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 poeticised images.¹³ 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: 9 assorted 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 felt lined display boards in scarlet red and cerulean blue, with black metal frames. Thin cerise cotton curtains. Smooth white walls. A clean dimly lit room.

We sit opposite each other exchanging words, sliding a piece of paper across the tight grain of a veneered 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 care-takers 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.

Muffled beneath the wall-to-wall, smooth unmarked terrain of modern machine-made carpet.

"Yes, I have those, 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 voice, overlain then by a rich handloom rug. I creaked beneath the chatter of feet and my surface razored with incantations, words being read, music and conversation that once filled the room.

We sifted through plastic pockets taking out small pieces of mounting card that were stained brown in their folds; the grain of images now fading but showing us fragments of the house's past. These fragile surfaces offered a glimpse into the manor as a home; they reveal intimate family moments, hints we'd 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 there holding the space. You are there but concealed, your grained and scarred surface bore the traces of every life lived here, scratched with castors and the shifting of furniture now sunk beneath a nylon fabric held in place by brass heels that settle into your bones.

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 seep from its fabric; we are all like detectives examining a crime scene forensically searching to understand its story in a space where memory and time slip and new fragments emerge.

You are blind, a blind window, broken shutters like cataracts darken your vision, the light leaking through the gashes in the slats, trying to find a way into the stark interior. The shafts of light reach inwards seeking to settle on a slip of chintz but here the walls have been brushed with white emulsion and there is little to illuminate.

"We are holding a Murder Mystery this weekend. Would you like to come and find out how Mr Black dies?" asks Mark.

We are tempted and think about the drama of the props strewn around the house that make false narratives; we desire Mr Black to have an imminent death. We muse about the mapping of his death and diagramming these new events, and yet these mystery tours are now breathing new life into the Manor's pores.

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 attics?

Site: Music Room, Wymenig Manor

Drawn by: BM/KE

Date: April 7 2017

Media: A1 permanent, marking tape, acetate, etc, pencil



Like: Music Room, Wigman's Room
Drawn by: BSM/K.F.
Date: April 7, 2017
Media: Air Permalan, Photocopy, a color
penal:

Scene Two: The Drawing Room

Props: 4 veneered MDF tables with round cylindrical black legs. Stacked office chairs. 6 red felt display boards. 1 electric heater. Scaffold poles. Timbers piled, earthen floor, plant roots and tendrils, chimney breast, windows part opened. Musty smell.

We stand at the door of the room looking in, uncertain about entering. The space is in disarray. Timbers are piled up and the smell of damp wood is evident. Furniture has been stored making access almost impossible; it is a squeeze to get in.

I lay close to the compacted floor, still, superfluous, but spared by those who treasure this place. I bear the marks of hands that shaped me many centuries past, the scars of tools, the winds that fitted the sturdy framework of timber. Now, I am slowly decaying into constellations of dust. I breathe my last dark exhalations, filled with personal metabolites, out into the room. And yet I know new life. Tiny grubs sheltered within my matter consume me.

My dust returns to you, the earthen surface. You are tangled with tree roots and bright green tendrils of fresh new growth breaking through. Small creatures that inhabit my cellular structure run across you to gain white threads of jelly & pun nests hard from my body and tiny spores thrown out from deep within my core. Nurture seeps from you to me.

Stepping down from the floorboards to the earth floor seems strange, like being outside and inside at the same time. Archaeologically, it reveals an assemblage of materials and accrued debris, broken bottles, plastic cups, and pieces of chalk. Compacted earth, fragments of timber, and new plant growth lies beneath the fireplace suggest other lives of the house.

Because of your elite and handsome window, the eye-did timber frame of the Manor collapsed. You were added, bringing elegance and refinement to the house, maybe two centuries ago, swelling proudly out from the west porch to take in fine views of the gardens and pastures beyond. You did not know that your installation left the house grossly damaged. Its sturdy frame rotfully weakened to jowled corner posts, led through. At some point, when the danger became evident, someone tried to strap the frame with an old iron cable wheel run, but the harm was done. That beetles did the rest of the work.

You've seen the pink damask roses bloom in the garden, the mint, the marigold and yellow helena whose heavy scent was used to perfume the room.

We discuss what might happen to the old timbers piled up on the floor, even now shedding and harbouring life, mutating. Timbers brought from different parts of the house to lay here, now redundant.

We are here to prop the frame, weakened and broken as it is. The exhausted timbers are permitted to rest upon us. We are steely strong, upright, locked in place, united and resolute and placed here to resist the collapse of the house by those who would so savour it. No beetle grubs can consume us, we are hard, resistant. Our matter will not speak of our earthly origin or the touch of any craftsman and his tools.

The question of what will happen to the floor timbers is interesting. When they were taken up they could have been thrown in a skip, but they are cherished and revered because of their age and perhaps because they have stories to tell which have not yet been discovered. Though they are riddled with beetles and damp. Maybe they should be left to decay in the gardens to provide a home for new life there, still part of the matter of the place.

The boundaries between the inside and outside dissolve. The house is an organic thing; its materials connect natural and cultural processes and activities.

Site: Drawing room, Wymering Manor

Drawn by: B.M./K.F.

Date: April 26 2017

Media: A1 Pentalene, Nonylating toluene acetate, ink, jamcill



Site: Drawing Room, Wignong Manor
Drawn by: BMJ/KF
Date: April 28 2017
Media: KI perspective, acetate,
photography + pencil

Scene Three: The Refectory.

Props: Brushes, paint, paint rollers, shelving unit, debris from the disused toilets, sinks, a tool box, suspended ceiling partly hung, boiler, flaking paint on the walls.

A notice pinned to the door saying

MICKS SPACE. NO MORE STORAGE. FULL UP!! HELP.

You are the towering chimneybreast which once dominated this room but now you are overwhelmed by all the tools and accumulated materials. This room has been so altered and become so cluttered that you are almost unnoticed.

From above a stone plaque on the chimney breast warns

A small leak will sink a big ship

And the family motto is a constant refrain,

Amour au dessus Loiaulte

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 inserted partitions and ceiling.

We enjoy the juxtaposition between the fireplace and the plastic toilet cubicles which are the remnants of its recent past as a youth hostel. We wonder whether the dumping of household goods in the room stops it from being renewed or valued?

We are surrounded by stainless steel sinks, cookers and utensils from when 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 refectory, garage, storeroom, and workshop.

The poetry of the space lies in the old photograph pinned to the chimneybreast; it acts as an imaginative prompting and makes you dream of 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 fake 1930's lights add an uncertain homely charm.

Site: Wymering Manor, Old Wymering, Kent

Drawn by: BM/KF

Date: May 5 2017

Media: A1 permatrace, masking tape, acetate, ink, pen.



Site: Refectory, engineering room
Drawn by: BM/KF
Date: May 5 2017
Media: Al. pematra, kromografi, a white
and pencil

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 poeticised 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.

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NOTES

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