



Exhibition Review

An Interior Affair: A State of Becoming

IDEA symposium exhibition, FORM Gallery,
Perth, September 6–October 6, 2012

Reviewed by Mary Anne Beecher

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Since its inception in 1996, the organization of Australia and New Zealand's interior design/interior architecture educators, known as IDEA, has established a reputation for sponsoring and producing high-quality academic events and publications. Thematic symposia and their associated proceedings, exhibitions, and gatherings have encouraged traditional scholars and persons engaged in creative, project-based practices to engage theories and issues that are relevant to the evolution of interior design as a discipline. The most recent symposium – entitled *Interior: A State of Becoming*, held in Perth, Australia in September 2012 – sustained this effort. This review will present a critical response to the works included in the symposium's exhibition as well as a consideration of the potential role of the exhibition as an increasingly important mode of exploring and presenting original design-related research.

An Interior Affair: A State of Becoming (the 2012 IDEA exhibition, slightly differently titled to the symposium itself) included seventeen creative works by interior design educators from Australia and New Zealand, the United States,

Canada, and the UK. The work was publically presented at the FORM Gallery in the heart of downtown Perth from September 6 to October 6, 2012. Both the exhibition website (<http://www.interior-becomings.com>) and its accompanying catalog detail the individual works shown and the multiple missions of the event: to showcase creative works that investigate, expand, and confront the conception of the interior as “a state of constant and dynamic ‘becoming’ rather than ‘being’” and to “encourage expansion in the fields of research practices and ultimately their audiences, in concert with the official bodies that measure research output, in order to locate and define a research model for interior architecture/interior design disciplines” (Lawrence, Mehzoud, Foster, Lommerse in *An Interior Affair* catalog 2012: 16).

The seventeen creative projects addressed the event’s provocation using a range of media and modes of communication with varying degrees of success. Creative acts that examine notions of space and interiority – whether expressing the intangibility of its qualities or the mutability of its realities – often struggle with how to capture and express qualities of scale or how to reveal that which is normally unseen. The responsive and reciprocal relationship sometimes cultivated between the interior and its inhabitants is an equally evasive condition to attempt to capture and express. And yet these intangible attributes are the terrain of the creative scholar of the interior; they are the substance of the studies that distinguish an interiors-based approach to practice from that of the form-giver or artist as well as of the anthropologist or behavioralist. The diversity of the projects included in this exhibition encourages the consideration of more than just the works themselves. It also encourages the contemplation of their ability to collectively express something new about the interior as subject in one of the following four ways: (1) by taking a close look at interiors or their photographic/cinematic representations; (2) by revealing some aspect of interior space that is not usually seen through manipulations of scale and opacity; (3) by revealing the responsive nature of the relationship between the interior and its inhabitant; or (4) by inserting a new element into a space for the purpose of revealing something new about the element and the space in combination with one another.

Of the projects attempting to document, study, and encourage new close views of interior conditions, Lorella Di Cintio and Jonsara Ruth’s *Unconscious House: Erasing Domesticity* provides a microscopic depiction of the sensuousness of the blemished skins of interiors left to defend themselves against the abuses of weather and time (Figure 1). Di Cintio and Ruth capture the decaying surfaces that frame the abandoned domestic space of a house in Detroit, Michigan using photography and an invocation of feminist theory. The variously scaled photographs of the derelict and decomposing house focus viewers’ attention on the new patterns and textures that are revealed when surfaces degrade. The refocusing of attention to



Figure 1

Detail of photograph of degrading painted surface in *Unconscious House: Erasing Domesticity*, by Lorella Di Cintio and Jonsara Ruth. Photograph: Bill Shaylor. Used with permission from Curtin University Interior Architecture.

the micro-scale of the interior environment is emphasized by the pairing of a tiny magnifying glass with a fragment of wall and the featuring of twisted rusting nails that were once used as fasteners in the crumbling house as a kind of specimen collected as part of a pseudo-archaeological process.

Lynn Churchill's *Triptych: Becoming Incorporated: Anatomical Drawings of the Farnsworth House* literally draws connections between the environmental control systems of architecture and the biological functions of the human body (Figure 2). While this comparison is not original, the juxtaposition of architectural drawings with

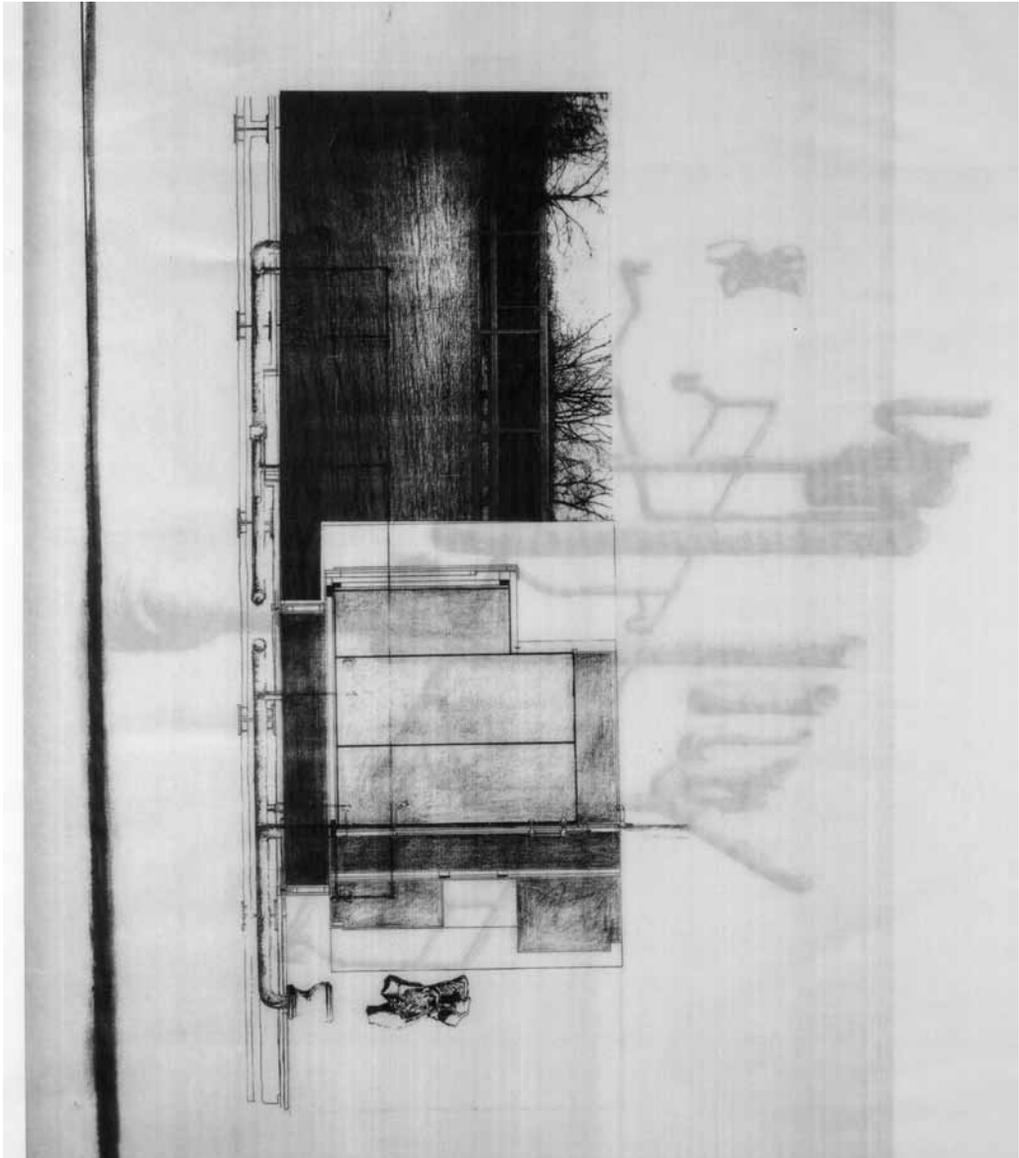


Figure 2

Detail from Lynn Churchill's *Triptych: Becoming Incorporated: Anatomical Drawings of the Farnsworth House*. Photograph: Bill Shaylor. Used with permission from Curtin University Interior Architecture.

anatomical drawings in a manner that contrasts the actual scales of each calls attention to the relative differences of scale between body, building, and system. Churchill's drawings illustrate conversations between hidden physical and social dimensions of the interior; dialogs that are too often unseen and unheard even when research is made graphic. Presented with images of what might be characterized as the inside of the interior, viewers are invited to consider how

the everyday realities of systems such as plumbing align or connect interiors of all types to one another.

Interior designers' interest in biomimicry has encouraged the study of natural material at the microscopic scale for some time as we increasingly look to models from nature to help us solve the dilemmas created by human-made systems. The video installation contributed by Natalie McLeod and Stuart Foster, both of New Zealand's Massey University, brings the imagery of such studies into view in a vivid way by projecting a molecular image of a palladium-coated material. As the images of projected surfaces expand, grow, and move, associations with shifting and changing landscapes are unavoidable. It is, however, the researchers' use of gaming software and technology, to create a room-scaled projection that responds to the presence of viewers, that brings real distinction to this exhibited work in relation to the interior. Because the animation of the project is triggered by the movements of participants, both the imagery of space and its literal creation through the establishment of a link between the moving image and the body become immersive in ways that simple acts of observation cannot. The experience of this relationship raises important questions about potential new ways in which technology may contribute to the creation of activated interior spaces and surfaces.

The expression of interior spatial and surface qualities at full scale is often missing from exhibitions, given that gallery space is finite and the logistics of transporting large works can be challenging. Still, it is the exhibition of work that engages or creates an environment that stimulates an understanding of the human-scaled impact of interior interventions that an event such as this really requires. Penelope Forlano's *Endless Quilt: Object Range* provides such an opportunity, as an assemblage of carefully crafted interrelated wooden surfaces that engage the wall of the gallery in a direct and meaningful way (Figure 3). Although Forlano's interest is primarily in the exploration of a person's association with and attachment to objects by instilling the ability to "appropriate, control, modify and adapt the work over time," it was the fortuitous placement of the work at the front of the gallery – with its rare storefront windows that invite ever-changing qualities of natural light – that enabled the piece to demonstrate its ability to alter interior space and the surface it engaged (Forlano in *An Interior Affair* catalog 2012: 30). Shifting light and shadows and the superimposition of the grid-like mullion pattern of the windows onto Forlano's "quilt" in the morning hours created heightened opportunities for the flat wall surface to be read as three-dimensional. Even when the piece was not mingling with daylight, the geometric protrusion of the surfaces of the three-dimensional "quilt" enlivened the otherwise flat wall in unexpected ways, raising questions about the nature of contemporary surfaces that are increasingly defined by the presence of prefabricated or milled modular components that are inherently additive and capable of rearrangement.



Figure 3
Detail of Penelope Forlano's *Endless Quilt*. Photograph: Bill Shaylor. Used with permission from Curtin University Interior Architecture.

By looking at the potential of Forlano's work and the works of a few others that interacted more directly with the space of the gallery at full scale, it is possible to begin to identify a second layer of significance of events such as the 2012 IDEA exhibition: that, in addition to revealing the various ways that theories of the interior have been addressed by scholars with creative practices, it is also possible to encourage the exhibition of creative projects in ways that demonstrate the potential of manipulating space and material through design. This aspect of this particular exhibition was uneven.

As a mode of expressing design research, exhibitions in general are challenged to craft the presentation of work in a manner that extends suggested meanings or that invites counter-readings. If Marshall McLuhan's notion that "the medium is the message" is even partially correct, then works about interiors should also acknowledge the significance of the way(s) in which they engage their own interiors, because without consideration of the three-dimensionality of the viewer's experience, one wonders why a researcher would bother to express their ideas using a medium other than words. By incorporating even more purposeful considerations of how projects should be displayed into the production of creative projects as a mode of disseminating design research, the ability of such works to communicate on multiple levels would be strengthened and enhanced. This could perhaps provide a motivation for recommending more collaborative research efforts between traditional scholars, practicing designers, and persons with hands-on fabrication experience – resulting in truly integrative creative practices with the potential to communicate more effectively both within and beyond our discipline. It may also encourage the establishment of clearer paths for linking theoretically oriented research to design practices in a manner that would be more inclusive of academics with increasingly practice-based experiences.

One additional significant contribution of *An Interior Affair: A State of Becoming* is the manner in which it promises to help establish the role of curatorial practice as a valid mode of interior design scholarship. The exhibition catalog contains an insightful essay by Fleur Watson, who argues that curating a design-based exhibition presents a critical and analytical opportunity for curators to provoke, edit, synthesize, and compose an exhibition's content in a manner that invites public consideration. If discovery truly emerges as a strategy to replace purposeful searching as the preferred mode of engaging information in the twenty-first century, the exhibition space (in both real and digital form) may become a more resonant mode of articulating new ideas. Although evidence of process is largely relegated to the designer's written statements for this exhibition, Watson's encouragement of the curatorial imperative to express design process as well as product should serve as a call to action for future curators to bring the presentation of process and method to the forefront of a design-based exhibition's content. By doing so, conditions, theories, and issues that are intangible and difficult to discuss in words may become a more immediate and significant aspect of participants' experience; a potential benefit to all who are engaged in design research.

Catalog

An Interior Affair: A State of Becoming. 2012. Perth: IDEA. Available in pdf form at: <http://idea-edu.com/symposiums/2012-interior-a-state-of-becoming>.