

Occupying Atmosphere

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Abstract: The notion of atmosphere; understanding interior space through an atmospheric lens, has gained currency in architectural media. We argue in this paper that atmosphere can be a conceptual tool to disrupt static and representational modes of spatial thinking; through its very formlessness, its intensities, transient qualities; which questions the identity of objects and subjects as discrete envelopes, and foregrounds instead a dynamic relationship between occupation and interior architecture. To illustrate this position we will look at how these notions were experimented with and drawn out in a fourth year studio at Victoria University of Wellington, in collaboration with a RMIT studio in Melbourne run by Professor Mark Burry. We argue in this paper that the limits to this project were indicated through students' projects that privileged either transience and ideation. These brought into question normative assumptions about occupation that bound the projects from inception.

Introduction

The notion of atmosphere; understanding interior space through an atmospheric lens, has gained currency in architectural media to expose the mutability of architecture, rather than relying on an understanding of architecture as solid, stable and reassuring. Historically, how one occupies a space has been defined through representational thinking; thinking that has been structured in such a way that we fix the world as an object; as a resource for man as subject. Representation fixes and orders relations around architecture as a static, stable and fixed object to be viewed at a distance, by an equally static and contemplative subject; it is a mode of thinking that organizes our bodies, and consequently our subjectivity. Representation orders relations physically and symbolically: to close down, to structure, to define inside and outside and finally to define zones of inclusion and exclusion.

We argue in this paper that atmosphere can be a conceptual tool to disrupt static and representational modes of spatial thinking; through its very formlessness, its intensities, transient qualities; which questions the identity of objects and subjects as discrete envelopes, and foregrounds instead a dynamic relationship between occupation and interior architecture. To illustrate this position we will look at how these notions were experimented with and drawn out in a fourth year studio at Victoria University of Wellington, in collaboration with a RMIT studio in Melbourne run by Professor Mark Burry.

In this studio, students experimented with intangible, atmospheric qualities of occupation and interior architecture to activate architecture. Students worked to infuse atmospheric qualities into the design and the design process. The engagement, effect (and possibly affect) of design media: analogue, digital drawings and models, was critically viewed by the students. For some students, the atmospheric became an imagined and critical occupation of the digital, for others a processual blurring of conceptual ideation; an atmospheric design process. The limits to this project were indicated through students' projects that privileged either transience or ideation. These brought into question normative assumptions about occupation that bound the projects from inception.

The grounds of critique

Architecture and interior architecture historically the common grounds for critique is an image of space stripped of subjective meaning; left to stand as a material fact, an end product, which

'represents' solidity, hierarchy, structure and stability: an object that is to be contemplated by a subject. This is a model of representational thinking: "the sense of representation I am outlining here is representation as it has come to structure our thinking so that we fix the world as an object and resource for man-as-subject."¹ The concern, generally and also within architecture, is how representation "positions a particular relation to, or thinking about the world."²

This apparent referential truth of architecture provides a rich source domain for the metaphorical power of the architecture; both Denis Hollier and Mark Wigley argue that the metaphor of inside and outside provides a general framework for representation and reason: it provides the structure to prevent thinking from collapsing.³ Thus the referential and metaphorical understanding of interiors in this framework eludes a sense of 'being' known through "a reinforced geometrism, in which limits are barriers" which reinforces a boundary between inside and outside.⁴

However, the metaphor of inside and outside does not just order thinking alone. It also organizes our bodies, and consequently our subjectivity. It orders relations physically and symbolically: to close down, to structure, through the definition of inside and outside and finally to define zones of inclusion and exclusion. The traditional figure that divides interior from exterior is the house.⁵ The house as a figure stands for the outside where the inside contains something quite -other. Architecture, the outside, in this scene of representation, for Wigley, is seen as a pure object distanced from the impure, clamorous and heterogeneous relations represented by the body: architecture is cultivated beyond the needs of the body, and in doing so transcends the body.⁶ Contained on the inside, in the interiors, is 'woman' guarded and contained within architecture by a law that precedes both her and the home.⁷ The law that domesticates her is the law of the father, the law of surveillance that centres on the taming of desire.⁸ This act of positing the feminine within the home is maintained as such, through the citation of the law, a law that is framed as beyond question. A number of distinctions are made apparent through the citation of the 'law of the father': a chain of signification, which frames the housing of gender as normative and natural. Men are embedded within the meaning of the exterior of the house, whereas women are confined to the inside of the home. Within this spatial displacement and confinement of the subject to particular spaces – occupation is negated.

Moreover, occupation within spatial discourse, whilst seemingly fundamental to the discipline for Jonathan Hill is historically framed as being outside the territory of spatial discourse. Hill, borrowing from Mary Douglas, suggests that the occupations of architecture are analogous to dirt, "they are matter out of place."⁹ Tschumi also argues that the "lived body has never been a concern for architecture."¹⁰ This sentiment was also articulated in the seventies; Kent Bloomer and Charles Moore argue, "the human body, which is our most fundamental three-dimensional possession, has not itself been a central concern in the understanding of architectural form."¹¹ The expulsion of the body from spatial design, the occupying body, operates to place ideation, abstraction and the contemplation of the architectural object in the foreground, rather than exploring how "we actually perform, scuff and mark architecture" how we actually occupy space.¹² Teresa Hoskyns also argues for the centrality of the body in interiors, to re-think the discipline supporting her position through Julieanna Preston and Mark Taylor who define interior design as concerned with the 'specifics of inhabitation and bodily presence.'¹³

In the studio looked at in this paper, this historical way of delineating a boundary between interior/architecture to support notions of stability, hierarchy and contemplation are questioned through the notion of atmosphere. The atmospheric is both immaterial and material; it is an object that literally weaves together these two relations. Wigley, for example, looks at the atmospheric as “some kind of sensuous emission of sound, light, heat, smell - a moisture, a swirling climate of intangible effects generated by a stationary object.”¹⁴ His description of the atmospheric speaks of interiors as layered within interiors which are demarcated by thresholds of difference.¹⁵ Atmosphere here is a heightened experience, a charged event – it is about occupation. Peter Zumthor also writes on the notion of atmospheric architecture, which speaks of interiority through his focus on material presence and the sensing capacity of the body. It is an interior space that wraps around the body. More recently Julieanna Preston, author of *Interior Atmosphere*, argues for atmosphere to be used as a spatial figure, a tool “to think of interior architecture as charged by and intensified by an enveloping surface.”¹⁶ These varied positions on the atmospheric still have in common a shift towards focusing on occupation over form.

Critically, a similarity spanning across these writings is a challenge to thinking about interiors as “enclosed and separate from the outside and the ability of a boundary to regulate and control intrusion (to ostracize) have produced ideas of interiors as hidden, private, and mysterious,”¹⁷ where occupation is confined to an understanding of the moment from private to public. Atmosphere instead provides chances to think of interior in its own terms: “an ambience, which is a space in and of itself; just there, faint, suspended; it seems separate and parallel at the same time; its connecting points may come about by chance.”¹⁸ Indeed the notion of the atmospheric offers an interesting conundrum because it complicates a position grounded in notions of form: “rather the atmospheric is the very condition for effecting our interpretation of architecture that is about the haptic nature of interior architecture as well as having interior architecture as its goal.”¹⁹ Occupation here is no longer operating in relation to boundaries, exclusions/inclusions and controlled access but speaks of an excess of these relations; a negotiation of the lushness of atmospheric interior qualities that wraps around the body – bringing together the body and interiors, foregrounding the dynamic relations between occupation and interior architecture.

In the next part of this paper we look to experimentation carried out by students; challenging stable notions of space and occupation, as bounded or even necessarily interior, through the notion of atmosphere. The studio is briefly introduced, followed by some contingent findings and conclusions.

Description of the studio

There were three projects for the studio; each project was weighted equally in terms of time and of marks. However, there was still a linear way of thinking through these projects from experimentation to application. The first project was broken up into two stages: In the first stage, the students had to map or record atmosphere, through digital images. Students had to then take a position on what atmosphere meant for them and interpret the images from the first stage.

There was a range of responses, from recording patterns of human movement, ambiguous, motile forms of smoke, soundscapes, heat and light and through to visual traces of a journey home. At this stage of the project, the students’ position on atmosphere, as a way to question relations of occupation and form, was informed by readings and lectures, among them

'Interior Atmospheres' by Julieanna Preston and 'The Atmospheric Properties of Walter Pichler's Work' by Paul James.

In the second stage of the first project, the students were asked to interpret their visual responses, through a series of media based experiments. There was a wide range of approaches and results; students shifted from analogue drawing to digital, pulled flat images into terrains (using digital software) and constructed analogue models based on digitally manipulated images. In one case, soundscapes were translated into form by the use of a custard type material placed over speakers emitting recordings of street sounds; creating animations of weird forms based on the familiar sounds; the translation was framed as teasing out unseen atmospheric qualities.

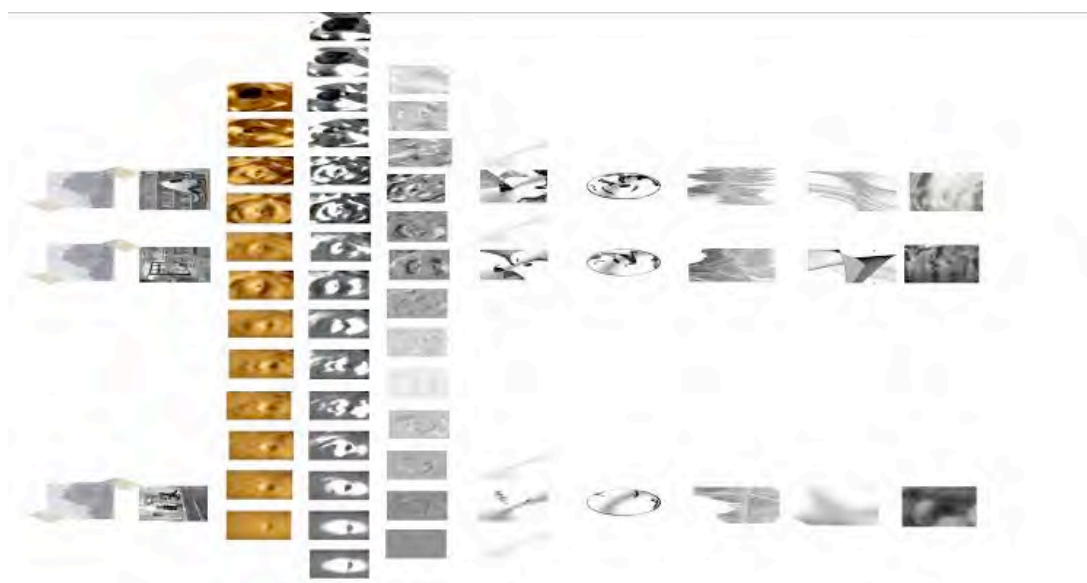


Figure 1. John Bradbury custardscape

Project two and three directed the students closer towards questions of occupation. Students were asked to continually draw on and critique their findings from project one and draw them into project two and three. In this stage they were given a choice of programme: an art-gallery, reading room, bathhouse or urban garden/ resting place. The programme's themselves are in some ways quite familiar grounds, and thus easily co-opted into traditional approaches and familiar patterns for students. In the final manifestation of the project, students were required to cross-programme their first scheme with a supermarket. The key findings of projects two and three are discussed in the following section.

Studio findings

The key findings, for students, in the studio are broken up into 3 broad and inter-related areas, separated only to allow this paper to proceed with some clarity. The main responses by students through the lens of the atmospheric moved towards questions of the body, programme and performance.

The body

Explored in a number of student projects was the interface between the body and the built, which was not just a simple mediating surface but a permeable interface, porous and

reactionary. Although it seems pertinent to note that this was predominantly a digital studio; however the introduction of digital technologies into spatial design has been, for the most part, accompanied by an apocalyptic tone. While digital technologies are often celebrated for their novelty, it is the perceived dual effects of distancing and instrumentalization of social and material relations mediated by this technology that is a source of anxiety. Students, in contrast to the dystopian image of digital studios, actually tended towards the body. These findings are similar to a position held by Brian Massumi and Mark Hansen who both argue that there has been a shift in digital design away from being reflective of 'disembodied' approach to design; both argue that it is important to recognize that within this 'shift' we are not moving from the body but towards it.²⁰ Hansen argues that a shift towards technology is a movement that is also towards a more haptic and affective understanding of space that is "grounded [in an] image of the body prior to an independent of external geometrical space...[where] experience is grounded in the biological potential of human beings."²¹

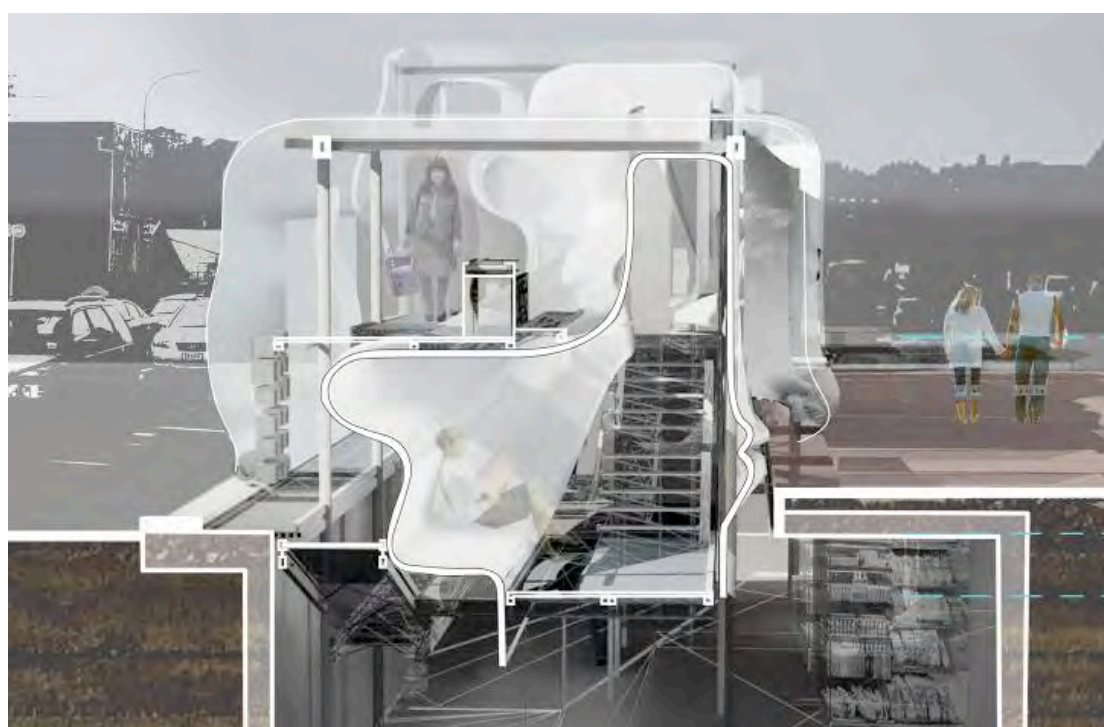


Figure 2. John Bradbury atmospheric sound

A more specific example from the studio was work by John Bradbury who focused on using sound to form and differentiate interiorities within a space; sound was the atmosphere, but sound, by virtue of being the progenitor of the spatial enclosure, also questioned the boundaries of the space – and the occupation: bodily recordings made up the soundscape, and the soundscape 'made' the space, which could then, theoretically, be occupied by more noise making bodies. Two programmes were injected into the design, each with their own aural, formal result and competed to push and pull the dividing enclosures. In this case it is argued that the programme found some kind of affective bodily life and co inhabited the design – with conventional (human body) occupation in parallel: bringing together sound, formal representation of sound, programme and body in noisy conflation.

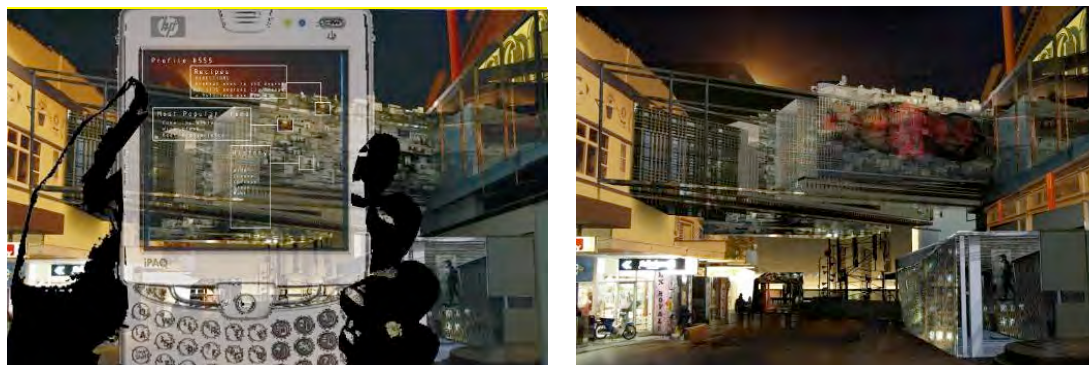


Figure 3. Emma Buchannan Virtual Graffiti

In Emma Buchannan's work, physical architecture wrestled with another, virtually augmented, architecture, made visible through a mobile phone. The project was entitled Virtual Graffiti. Buchannan's project was a series of interiors within interiors; a Russian doll effect, where boundaries between spaces questioned even the most awake critic to constantly ask – what is real. Within the project, the interior boundaries are never discrete or finite and constantly swirl around the body. Whilst one might not be able to physically see the lines of the project one can still use a phone, a hand, a voice to communicate in this reality. The images of the project thus convey a thickness of space, its ambience made present through the unknowable boundaries between virtual and real spaces.

The rhetoric used by students spoke of the body and also of affect as a way to describe the unexpected, the singular, the quirky and the unpredictable, which was critical to their work; where space itself was both a medium and a trigger for affective bodily experiences.²² The representation of projects was also utilized to convey ideas of affect and bodily experiences; Images were densely populated with bodies moving and engaging with the built space, time lapse images, movies of people occupying space and movies inserted into stills all operated to insist on bodily occupation of space.



Figure 4. Stephanie Sebald occupation of overlapping viewpoints.

Although not all of the student work focused on the body. Some turned from the body to more representational occupations. Stephanie Sebald for example focused on occupation via overlapping viewpoints. Thus her work shifted from the body to a privileging of vision once more. The interior space was designed to disappear, or appear when viewed from a nodal point, her design was most successful in virtual space where lines and blade forms could gain and lose thickness as a moving eye circled around them. Space was then constructed with this criteria for her final project– in terms of the potential for dematerialising. Her final design thus became a critique of fixed viewpoints; to create form and also to question the spectator as a passive observer.

It was clear that students' work was offering a more complicated relationship to the body than trying to evoke a body 'prior' to geometrical space – yet both geometrical space was woven together with the students' atmospheric experimentation. One could argue, that this mixing of atmosphere with an objective reality still allowed for an open process of experience alongside an architectural order, rather than relegating architecture once more to that which is solid, stable and reassuring.

Programme

The choice to use a cross-programme for the third project was used to prompt students to deal with questions of occupation. Of course the use of cross-programming as a methodology for design is evident in the work of Bernard Tschumi and Rem Koolhaas, both of whom look to cross-programming as a way to re-think or challenge notions of concept and experience, space and use, and for Tschumi “this would lead to unprecedented combinations of programmes and space,”²³ Thus it allows us to displace, decentre and con-join new relations and subjective possibilities, to disrupt habitual ways of occupying space.

Through cross programming, students challenged how we habitually occupy space. In Julio Ramirez Bruna work two programmes, bathhouse and supermarket, were in mutual and conflicting occupation/ cross occupation. The site was at play in this also, with the building being partially submerged and between the sea and wharf: spaces opposed each other, under or above the waterline, blended from sea to land. A protuberant object displaying supermarket advertising dived down from a high space to intrude and hover over the private baths below sea level. In this project, the boundaries of spaces blurred into various intersections that often challenged the body, in a space where there was no place to find an easy state of equilibrium. Thus how a body would occupy space is highlighted and also challenged.

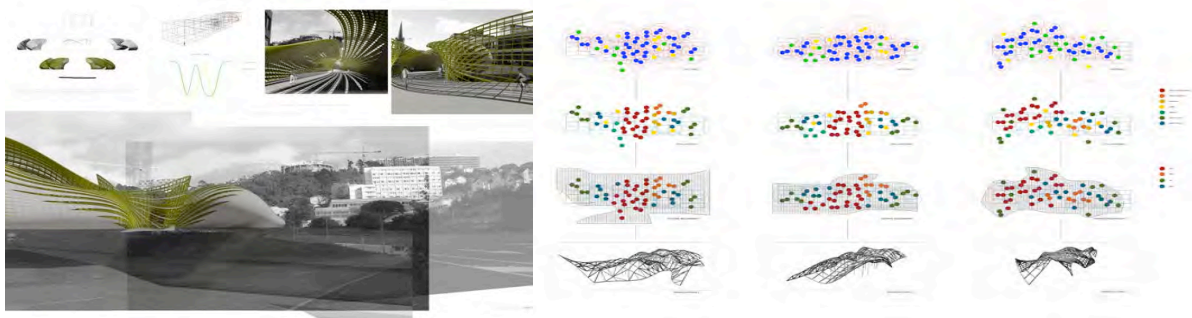


Figure 5. Eli Nuttal exploration in cricket of bodily movement.

Of course occupation that was approached through questions of cross-programming found resolution through datascares. Information about the body was collated by students, in particular movement patterns were used by students as inputs to be used in their design work. Different alignments of occupation, in Eli Nuttal's work, for example, was generated through multiple permutations and graphs, generated in an informational software called cricket. Occupation is crucial to these schemes, but as a device, commenting on regular patterns of behaviour, an abstract ordering machine of a moving body. The question becomes: if occupational data is turned into a generating device – is this, once more, architectural thinking as limited to representational devices? In this case the student also started to look at what a body might actually do in the space and tried to use another strategy where spaces were used to prompt the body into action. Although the result of diagramming and of cross-programming produced spaces that were similar to Julio's work which were restricted and difficult, where the potential occupants' only role was to bear witness to the building 'being a piece of atmospheric research' the result of this is that once more the design knowledge that is produced speaks of known routes and normative conceptions of architecture.

Performance

There were performances. Indeed a number of projects were drawn out and talked through a language of performativity. In Anna Wallace's work, for example, the atmospheric was framed in relation to the horizon. In exploring this idea she experimented with differing body relationships to the spaces she designed such as a more formal geometrical relationship and also one where the architecture activated the body. A performative rhetoric allowed her to articulate the relationship between space and an actual 'doing' that occurs within that space. Wallace brought together in this project the language of performance, body and affect in this project. However, affect in the hands of writers such as Hansen and Massumi, is clearly anti-performative. In particular, they frame performative understandings of subjectivity as a constructivist position that is unable to account for dynamic and sensate relations.²⁴ This of course raises interesting questions about how notions of performance and affect start to wrap around each other; the discursive, the ephemeral, the sensual weaving together different lines of thought. It is a conundrum between questions of intent and motivations behind performances (or lack of) and mobilisation of the affects of such relationships. It is a theoretical playfulness where knowledge and passion are brought together rather remaining as discrete ways of thinking about occupation.



Figure 6. Anna Wallace outdoor seating/performance space.

Contingent conclusions

To conclude, historically occupation is defined in relation to a solid, reassuring object which has a boundary between inside and outside. Occupation in this framework is either negated or it is about a movement solely between private and public. The first part of this paper looked critically at the historical framing of this line between inside and outside which is framed by the solidity of boundaries. We then looked at the notion of atmosphere and how it has been framed as a conceptual tool to disrupt static and representational modes of spatial thinking; through its very formlessness, its intensities, transient qualities; which questions the identity of objects and subjects as discrete envelopes, and foregrounds instead a dynamic relationship between occupation and interior architecture. These ideas were explored and tested through a studio. The attribution of the interior with atmospheric qualities in this studio was communicated through various means that more often eluded to an interior that is understood as a 'fleshiness' of space, circumfusing the subject and creating a series of spaces; a series of enclosures overlapping and enveloping each other.

Indeed in this studio students looked towards occupation of space described through self-reflection, negotiation and engagement through the body. Yet there was still an engagement with a more geometrical understanding of space, which was weaved together with a more atmospheric approach which was relational and open to the processes of occupation. It was clear that the students' work occupied, in itself, a space of irony, inconsistency, and partiality. A space when occupied that is able to draw on a more fluid and heterogeneous lexicon, rather than dualisms and essentialising language that would lead one to draw conclusions about the studio as purely geometric in ideology or purely atmospheric.

Thus the body that occupies space, which has been explored in this studio, embraces both immaterial and material relations, normative and utopian possibilities, symbolism and praxis, as well as social activities, processes and relations. The projects of course still rest within the realm of the conceptual, whilst imagining the visceral, and as a result are indexed by continually trying to think about how the 'occupier' appropriates, interprets, or even how they may choose not to engage with space as immaterial, material or as a composite relation. Of course at times the occupier (whoever or whatever that might be) was left challenged and maybe this confrontation of occupation points to theoretical possibilities in the thinking on occupation- as shifting towards the ephemeral whilst still negotiating the grounds of other modes of thinking.

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Endnotes

¹ Bolt, B. (2004) *Art beyond representation: the performative power of the image*, London and New York, I.B. Tauris, p. 13.

² Bolt, B. (2004) *Art beyond representation*, p. 13.

³As Hollier writes on architectural metaphors, "their cliché nature and their anonymity are, however, an indication that they are not innocent, but rather surreptitiously accomplishing some ideological task for which they are the instruments." Hollier, Denis. (2000) 'Architectural metaphors,' in Michael K. Hays (ed), *Architecture theory since 1968*, MIT Press, Cambridge

Massachusetts, London, England, p. 192. Hollier and subsequently writers such as Bernard Tschumi, Rem Koolhaas and Mark Wigley within architecture have critically deconstructed what the metaphor of architecture stands for. Hollier. (2000) 'Architectural Metaphors,' p.190.

⁴ McCarthy, C. (2005). 'Toward a definition of interiority'. *Space and Culture*, 8 (2), 112-125, p.114.

⁵ It is the house that is used to establish the general opposition between an inner world of presence and an outer world of representation that is then used to exclude the very figure as a 'mere' metaphor, a representation that can be discarded outside of philosophy. But the figure always resists such an exclusion. In as much as the condition of the metaphor of the house, the house is not simply another metaphor that can be discarded. And, more than this, although metaphor is understood as departure from the house, it is still not a departure from housing. Wigley, M. (1995) *The Architecture of deconstruction: Derrida's haunt*, Cambridge, Mass. and London, MIT Press, p.102.

⁶ Wigley, M. (1995) *The architecture of deconstruction: Derrida's haunt*.

⁷ Baydar, Gülsüm. (2005) 'Wo/man in contemporary architectural discourse,' in Hilde Heynen and Gülsüm Baydar (eds), *Negotiating Domesticity*, New York : Routledge, 2005. p.32.

⁸ Baydar, (2005) 'Wo/man in contemporary architectural discourse,' p.32

⁹ Hill, J. (1998) *Occupying architecture: between the architect and the user*, London, Routledge.

¹⁰ Tschumi, B. (1996) *Architecture and disjunction*, Cambridge: MIT Press. In a similar manner Gail Weiss argues, whilst the body has been defined as an important theme in reaction to modernism, "the social and phenomenological interactions of the body within architecture have tended to drop out of discussions within [contemporary] architectural discourse." Weiss, G. (1999) *Body images: embodiment as intercorporeality*, New York, Routledge.

¹¹ Bloomer, K. and Moore, C. (1977) *Body, memory and architecture*, New Haven: Yale University Press. p. ix. A sentiment also shared with the more recent writings of, Marble, S. (1988) *Architecture and the body*, New York: Rizzels. And Tschumi, B. (1996) *Architecture and disjunction*.

¹² Hill, J. (2006) *Immaterial architecture*, New York and London, Routledge, p.2.

¹³ Hoskyns, Teresa. (2007) 'Not cushions and curtains: textiles, architecture and interiors, in [Edward Hollis](#), [Andrew Milligan](#), [Alex Milton](#), [Drew Plunkett](#), [John Gigli](#) and [Frazer Hay](#) (eds), *Thinking inside the box*, Middlesex University Press. and Preston J. & Taylor M. (eds), 92006) *Intimus*, Chichester, Wiley Academia, p.6.

¹⁴ Wigley, M. (1998) *The architecture of atmosphere*, *Atmosphere*, Daidalos June.

¹⁵ Preston, J. (2008). 'Interior Atmospheres'. *AD*, 78 (3) p.9.

¹⁶ Preston, J. (2008). 'Interior Atmospheres', p.7

¹⁷ McCarthy, C. (2005). 'Toward a definition of interiority.' p. 121.

¹⁸ McCarthy, C. (2005). 'Toward a definition of interiority.' p. 121.

¹⁹ Hansen, M. (2002). 'Wearable space.' *Configurations*, 10 (2), p.369.

²⁰ Hansen, M. (2002) 'Wearable space.' & Massumi, B. (2002) *Parables of the virtual; movement, affect, sensation*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press.

²¹ Hansen, M. (2002) *Bodies in code: interfaces with new media*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, p.210. Or in the words of Massumi, where architecture as the stimulus for new kinds of experience architecture acts as a facilitator of experiences.

http://intelligentagent.com/archive/Vol5_No2_massumi_markussen+birch.htm accessed on the 02/03/07

²² Hansen writes further of the Blur building, space is 'directly coupled to the movement and experience of bodies, and is thus divorced from any fixed spatial form that, to the extent it does still exist, comes to function as the trigger for an affective bodily experience.' Hansen, M. (2002) *Bodies in code*, p.330.

²³ Tschumi, B. (1984) *Event Cities*, MIT Press.

²⁴ Hemmings, C. (2005). 'Telling Feminist Stories.' *Feminist Theory*, 6 (2).

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