

Spaces of Architectural Overcoming

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Abstract: *This paper reflects an interest in how interior and landscape sites are connected in their capacity to exceed or 'overcome' architecture and practice conventions of designing, making and use. In professional architectural practice, these conventions are generally treated as distinct and hierarchical steps. This reflects a view of life that is ordered, controlled and deterministic. Referring to ideas that affirm the unpredictable and evolutionary nature of life, I argue for more experimental, improvised spatial practices. I have drawn from Elizabeth Grosz's writings about space and time to show how we can use change and spontaneous making in everyday life as designing. This has helped me to question how spaces are produced, and the singular design 'authority' of the architect or building designer. I have found that working in interior and landscape sites provides more opportunities for unplanned construction connected to the lives of those who inhabit space: opening up architecture and architectural practice to unpredictable forces repressed in professional practice. This paper, part of my doctoral research, explores the conceptual and practical dimensions of experimental interior projects.*

Keywords: *overcoming, unfolding, transversing*

introduction

Rather than focusing on disciplinary definitions of architecture, landscape architecture and interior design, I will speculate on those qualities and elements of interior and landscape spaces that disrupt the striated, hierarchical methods of architectural production. I believe interiors and landscapes can create what I term 'spaces of architectural overcoming', open to possibilities beyond finite architectural form and function. I use the term 'architecture' to evoke the conceptual and physical dimensions of building and, in particular, the methods of production frequently associated with professional practice. I do not want to suggest that interiors and landscapes are dependent on architecture for their existence: rather, that when specifically practised as outside architecture, interior and landscape projects reveal that environment-making is an open-ended and speculative process for projecting possibilities of how we might live. My experience in making and thinking about landscape spaces, however, is currently limited, thus biasing my writings towards interior spaces. In previous IDEA publications (Smith 2003a; Smith 2004b), I have written about the *betweenness* of interior space in consolidating my doctoral research and focusing on a particular experimental design project, *Avebury St*. 'Betweenness' is a notion embodying a dynamic view of people's

continual coming to terms with their place in the world (Titchkosky, 1996). This paper forms an important and final part of this trilogy of writing, and I use it to speculate on the experimental nature of interior and landscape sites. I have collaged architectural images of *Avebury St* by photographer-architect Graham Meltzer (Figure 1), with images of occupation and building (Figure 2), to reinforce the blurring of time and physical space.

In this paper, I begin by developing a conceptual overview of three concepts: ‘unfolding’, ‘transversing’ and ‘spaces of architectural overcoming’. These concepts express a view of life that is dynamic, creative and evolutionary. They support open-ended and speculative thinking. I desire to avoid specifying singular design processes, rules, materials and forms. To argue that a particular project or design process represents these ideas may discourage others from developing practices and projects different to the examples I discuss, paradoxically denying the evolutionary spirit of the concepts. I refer to *Avebury St.* as a research project, to show how my understanding of practice – and specifically the concepts of unfolding, transversing and overcoming – has evolved. *Avebury St.* is an attempt to produce environments in reciprocity with the ever-changing, unpredictable social and material conditions of life. In the final section, I speculate on the implications for design practice. Grosz (2003) speaks about the power of philosophy to generate questions about life, not simply to represent and explain life. So too might we think of built spaces as generating questions about how we might live, not simply just resolving our functional needs and desires.

unfolding, transversing and overcoming

There has been much written about the concept of the fold in architectural and design literature (Lynn 2004), focusing largely on the physical forms architects have produced while inspired by this idea. The fold is associated with philosopher Gilles Deleuze (2001) through his seminal text *The Fold, Leibniz and the Baroque*. The concept of the fold allows Deleuze to develop philosophical thinking beyond issues of human perception, subject-object dualisms and ideas of representation. Deleuze believes life is made up of continuously changing forces and events, rather than parts/wholes or subjects/objects: folds refer to the many worlds or possibilities that develop in life (Badiou 1994: Colebrook 2002, pp. 54–55). Unlike most Western philosophy, Deleuze’s writings are not human- or subject-centric. Deleuze’s thinking affirms the creative potential of life to evolve in a myriad of ways (Colebrook, 2002, p. xxiv), challenging the idea that life develops according to preconceived plans or human perception alone. We can think of all animate and inanimate life as creative acts: for example, ideas do not represent or explain life, but ‘transform and act upon life’ (Colebrook, 2002, p. xxiv; refer also Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 11). Many architects have used the idea of folding

in their buildings: literally using physically twisting forms to make buildings which symbolise motion and flow from inside to outside (Jormakka, 2002, p. 41; Capro, 2004, p. 15). I argue it is limiting to translate this philosophical idea directly into physical forms that mimic or represent interior-exterior movement alone, as this both fails to engage with Deleuze's non-representational thinking and represses other kinds of interior-exterior relationships. This may contribute to the segregation between time and space often found in Western philosophical writings: a separation that I believe limits the way we might embrace change and spontaneity in thinking about and making built environments. Space, unlike time, is often seen as fixed, immutable, and hierarchical. Furthermore, many architects emphasise the making of building elements as part of a unified, formal continuity (Lynn, 2004, p. 11). How might we conceptualise the interconnections between interior and landscape spaces in terms of how environments are part of the change and unfolding of life itself, rather than simply re-presenting folded shapes in fixed physical form? The term 'unfolding' refers to the unpredictability and difference that underpins all life. Unfolding does not imply evolution according to a pre-determined plan, but rather the potential of things to develop and become different over time (Grosz, 2004, p. 24).

'Transversing' is another term that I believe invokes time and change, through an emphasis on movement. Transversing is an idea associated with both Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari through their use of the terms 'transversality' and 'the transversal' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 239; Massumi, 1992, p. 106). To be provocative or inventive, we must constantly 'sidestep' (Massumi, 1992, p. 106) established paths and approaches, always moving between different courses of action. Transversing does not necessarily refer to physical movement. For example, we can think of transversing as a way of moving beyond established legislative and professional dogma affecting architectural space, particularly by working with sites perceived to be inconsequential to architectural structure: such as interior furniture and decoration, and garden cultivation and structures.

The third concept 'overcoming' is associated here with the nineteenth-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. It invokes a movement beyond established norms. 'Life is a form of self-overcoming, a form of affirmation, an excess or superabundance of opposing forces, whose internal will, what Nietzsche describes as the "will to power", interprets and thereby transforms itself and its world' (Grosz, 2004, p. 10). Nietzsche is interested in our drive to overcome or transform our lives and, in doing this, move beyond the average, normative forces that oppress our potentiality. The concept of 'overcoming' suggests openness to difference and that which has been excluded from dominant cultural and scientific discourses (Grosz, 2004, p. 11).

discovering unfolding, transversing and overcoming at Avebury St

How can we think of buildings as part of a constantly evolving world of unfolding, transversing and overcoming rather than discrete, complete objects? How can design practice reveal the change and spontaneity underpinning everyday life? These questions have evolved through my practice-led research, focusing on the maintenance of and installation made in an inner-city cottage in which my partner, son and, at times, mother reside. Both my research intent and the *Avebury St.* project itself have unfolded through the blurring of people, materials, spontaneous making, living and designing on-site. Sidestepping conventional methods of production, we have built upon the dynamic approach of the experimental and somewhat spontaneous alterations by the house's previous occupants and student tenants. Our designing unfolds through available and inexpensive materials – recycled from the existing house, discarded in construction bins and local recycle shops – and through the capacity to manipulate materials as they appear. Without a budget to alter or extend the existing building structure, our work has been focused on interior material replacement, built-in furniture and decoration, and landscape maintenance.



*Figure 1: Avebury St: Inside-outside environment in the rear garden.
(Photography: Graham Meltzer, 2004)*



*Figure 2: Avebury St: An evolving edge environment.
(Collage by Cathy Smith from original images by
Matthew Dixon 2003 and Graham Meltzer 2004)*

The concept of 'unfolding' has helped me to rethink how interior and landscape environments can be made differently to the structured modes of production associated with professional architectural practice. To do this, I accept that designing is a force of everyday life rather than the making of a product that facilitates or organises life. Yet professional practice downplays changing needs and circumstances to prioritise financial and legal concerns. The RAIA (Royal Australian Institute of Architects) produces documents that govern the professional practices of a registered architect, with an emphasis on controlling and limiting changes during the construction process. This ensures that the client receives a building that is planned, both financially and functionally, in advance – and most importantly, reduces the likelihood that the architect might be sued for creating a building that differs from the drawings, financial costings and time schedules.

Once occupied, the dynamic life of buildings and their occupants is revealed in the many changes which happen both inside and outside the architectural shell. Working with non-structural interventions has enabled us at *Avebury St* to respond to uncontrollable, external forces that would have made a design master plan redundant: forces such as transient

neighbours and an expanding family. Replacing existing surface materials and installing built-in furniture can be done progressively and spontaneously in response to our lives on the site as this work does not require prior building approval, even if it requires some insight into safe construction processes to avoid injury. Fences, screens, awnings, soft landscaping and site maintenance can also be constructed or demolished as part of daily life. We tend to describe these activities as home maintenance or occupation rather than designing, so that they remain largely unregulated. Yet these tactical interventions can have a fundamental impact on both spatial quality and how we live, enabling us to respond to unpredictable changes in our lives such as relationships, the weathering of building and seasonal variation. I would be naive to suggest that professional practice change to include and, by association legalise, experimental, spontaneous construction – that is, to make these activities norms of designing. The normalisation of these marginal activities would also make static their dynamic nature. I think it is more provocative and interesting to ask: how do building maintenance, experimental living and making help us participate in the dynamic dimensions of life? How do these activities rupture the conventions of our professional, academic and educational practices, suggesting new potentialities for how we live and make built environments? And, importantly, *where* might these activities occur?

The concept of ‘transversing’ has helped me to re-evaluate the importance of interior and landscape sites often considered secondary to architectural space and structure. In feminist and cultural theory, architecture and architectural monuments are often associated with control and order, and the interior with being contained and oppressed (Irigaray 1999, p. 95). Ironically, by sidestepping architectural structure and conventional methods of production at *Avebury St*, I have found that working in interior and landscape sites has provided a freedom and spontaneity denied in architectural practice. While a gendered reading of practice might see my inability to manipulate architectural structure as oppressive, I experience the unexpected challenges associated with making my intimate, family dwelling a spatial practice ultimately rewarding and architecturally liberating: transversing the limitations of practice as much as physical building. The concept of ‘transversing’ has also reinforced a challenging of material and functional norms during the design process. At *Avebury St.*, we use materials and details associated with the interior in external courtyards and fences, rather than worry about material appropriateness and convention. Similarly, we did not use spaces in the way they were originally conceived. For example, we have slept in all spaces in the house, to see which spaces would provide the best sleeping conditions: we could not, however, fit the bed in the bathroom!

Finally, how might we rethink practice in terms of ‘overcoming’? My experiences of *Avebury St.* reinforced the importance of design opportunities alongside and beyond mainstream commercial practice. I would like to term these projects ‘spaces of architectural overcoming’: referring to the physical and conceptual dimensions of spaces produced experimentally, and often communally, as part of everyday life. These spaces are designed, made and occupied spontaneously, without conventional building plans, in response to the different site, material and social forces acting upon life: representing an overcoming of architecture and its associated legal, professional and commercial forces. Spaces of architectural overcoming are already visible in vernacular and socio-political traditions of building – for example, shed builders and squatters. In these experimental backyards and rooms, ever-changing resources, needs and circumstances ensure that established design approaches must be constantly challenged, changed and overcome. *Avebury St* belongs to this tradition of everyday, and arguably unremarkable, practice!

We have accepted that at *Avebury St*, we are but one of the many forces within a dynamic design process and, as such, participate in rather than control and order the built environment. We change our space in response to the suggestions made by many designer and non-designer visitors to the house. By avoiding design drawings and models, we open up our project to forces other than our own ideas and experiences, thus allowing the project to unfold in unpredictable and exciting directions. We bring materials and tools to our home before developing both design needs and responses over time, through available materials, our capacity to build and our imagination; and our minimal construction sketches (and the ideas contained within them) are easily discarded! My partner Mat describes our approach as ‘recycled material liberation’ (Dixon 2004), as we invent new functions and applications for discarded materials. Working with others’ ‘garbage’ allows you to be more experimental and open to change – especially as it is cheap and accessible. If our work had not been restricted to landscape maintenance and interior fitout, I would have failed to see the unfolding, transversing and overcoming characteristic of DIY (Do It Yourself) projects. By working experimentally and ephemerally, we have overcome the hierarchical distinctions between those who design, make and occupy space. Popular reality television shows like *Changing Rooms* and *Backyard Blitz* capitalise on our desires to appropriate and change space over time and as part of our occupation of homes. These shows focus on lifestyle, decorative themes, value-adding and resale values, rather than understanding the forces that drive change in our environments. We might see these programs as symptomatic of the inevitability and precedence of time over space.

speculations on practice

How might others expand upon, challenge or overturn my experiences of architectural overcoming? I do not want to suggest approaches that *represent* concepts like 'unfolding' or 'becoming', but rather provoke other practices for making environments and changes to our orientations towards design process and production. I would therefore like to suggest three tendencies or orientations to the conception and making of built space as a starting point. These tendencies reflect the change and spontaneity embodied in philosophies of unfolding, transversing and overcoming.

provoking

Treat designing as a provisional activity, whereby environments are provisional and ephemeral. Instead of regarding built environments as solutions to problems of spatial inhabitation, treat them as provocations about how we might live, requiring constant adjustment and adaptation, and generating further questions. Projects such as DIY projects, and garden and furniture maintenance may provide more opportunities for exploration and discovery beyond the financial and legal frameworks of mainstream professional practice. It would be easy to think about, make and inhabit interiors and landscapes in ways consistent with professional architectural practice. However, this thinking may limit the potential for interior and landscape sites to generate a more experimental practice.

shifting

By constantly shifting our design approaches, materials, practices and projects, we might open up designing to forces downplayed or excluded in mainstream design practice. As designers embracing forces outside our normal conceptual frameworks and methods of production – peoples, ideas, materials, labour – our projects will develop in unanticipated directions, open to other possibilities and change throughout the design processes.

blurring

I argue this is the most important, overall tendency for reconnecting environments and their production with the dynamic nature of life: the blurring of many forces normally treated as hierarchical project stages. New sites, ideas, materials, labour and living might mix into one continuous, ongoing activity that produces unpredictable, ephemeral environments embedded in the fabric of everyday life.

These approaches demand courage, and more time and energy than commercial practice generally allows, hinting at the temporal life beyond space, in all its complexity, divergence

and potentiality. Developing practice as part of family life has been relentless, physically and financially exhausting, and at times downright depressing, particularly when we have been 'doing it, then (un)doing it and finally (over)doing it...' (Rendell, 1998, p. 246). We grow tired of dismantling walls, only to find we need to re-assemble rooms to accommodate our expanding family. I may dream of living in a minimalist apartment but, in the end, our constant making and remaking has shown us how we can reinvent our worlds and overcome our frustrations with life, the universe and all things architectural.

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