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Publication details:

Proceedings of ConnectED 2007 International Conference on Design Education
9780646481470 (ISBN)

Event details:

ConnectED 2007 International Conference on Design Education
Sydney, Australia

Publication Date:

2007

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.26190/unsworks/505>

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Two Corpses: Artist/Architect Collaborations for Public Built Works as a Model for the Interior Architecture Design Studio

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Saturday, February 24, 2007

ABSTRACT

Since the year 2000 Matthew Johnson, artist, and myself, Bill MacMahon, architect and lecturer in the Interior Architecture program at UNSW, have been collaborating upon the incorporation of artworks into buildings. Such multidisciplinary work is having a direct outcome upon my architectural design practice and my work in design studio with Interior Architecture students.

As interior architects often work in collaborative teams involving the development of their ideas designs within the work of architects so the work of Matthew and myself might act as a model for Interior Architecture practice. Lessons learnt in the negotiations of changes to architect's designs can be taught to students of Interior Architecture. It offers lessons in the contextualization of design.

INTRODUCTION

Collaboration is like a love affair; it segues from admiration to anxiety, rejection to rage, desire to envy, powerlessness to misunderstanding, from not getting what you want but maybe coming nearer to knowing what you thought that might be. (Clarke, 2006, p52)

The interior architect is often the follower in a building project. Whether their work consists of collaboration with an architect or working within an existing building the interior architect has, by necessity, to work within a given context. In the past the relationship between interior architect and the building architect has been a source of friction. I would argue that with the acceptance of the professional role of the interior designer their relationship to the building procurement process has become normalized. They are seen to have something to offer.

Similarly the role of the artist working within the architectural field has often been a cause for concern. I believe this role, like that of the interior architect, is becoming normalized.

An imperative by the architect to shape the work has often been seen at odds with the artist, this situation was not helped by the arranged marriage nature of such relationships. Often

the developer, or a third party, imposes the artist upon the architect.

Occasionally the collaboration with an artist is welcomed by an architect, often times, as Jes Fernie writes, the artist is seen as being more "in touch" than the architect. "*Herzog and de Meuron (hardly renowned for their meekness) go so far as to state that "artists are usually more interesting than architects. The artist places contemporary problems at the heart of his activity, whereas the architect tends to find these embarrassing, inconvenient, undesirable even."* (Fernie, 2006, p 13)

This should be contrasted by this quote from Andrew Brighton writing in 1993.

*"Whilst collaborations were generally proposed to 'humanize' architecture, Brighton is less polite, observing: 'the almost obscene spectacle of an attempt to create Siamese twins out of two corpses' which produces 'decorative kitsch and authoritively bland buildings [sic] (Brighton, 1993a)."*¹

In collaboration with Matthew Johnson my role has been to negotiate the architectural divide and has been revealing of the status of the artist in the development of integrated artworks. At one end of the process I have been providing documentation in the language of the architect while at the other facilitating the integration of the artwork into the fabric of the building.

It is this integration that has a bearing upon the role of the interior architect and harks back to the notion of the contemporary respect for context in the broadest sense.

When the designer of the interior has to work simultaneously with the architect (the designer of the exterior?) notions of boundaries come into play, Is there a clear division between in and out or is there a "hinge" in the manner oft attributed to Deleuze whereby the interior expresses itself upon the exterior.

¹ Quoted by Malcolm Miles. 1997.

I. PROJECTS

1. Glenroy Community Centre, Melbourne, Victoria.

Matthew Johnson was commissioned by the architects McGauren Giannini Soon of Melbourne to develop an “art” component for this council funded community centre. The engagement process meant that “architects” were “on board” and amenable to ideas for the work.

The design process undertaken by Matthew and myself consisted, after briefings by the architect, to study the nature of the particular urban context in which the community centre was to be lodged. The physical nature of the area was of a suburb strongly associated with decorative brickwork in post WW11 housing. The social context was a suburb with a high level of migrant population with many citizens utilizing social services.

The creative process began with Matthew developing a pencil drawing that was in keeping with his notions of his optical work². Having decided that the work should be rendered in brick my role as collaborator was to faithfully render this drawing into brickwork patterns.

Adjustments had to be made to allow the line work of the drawing to be reflected in recurring brick patterns determined by the module of the brick. This drawing, upon acceptance by the architect was then incorporated directly into the contract drawings³.

The result is that the brick patterns fold throughout the building. They cross the façade, enter through the foyer and even emerge in the tearooms.

2. The Yellow House

The Yellow house is located in Macleay Street Potts Point. The house was once the site of the Terry Clune Gallery and was, for a time, taken over by artists including Martin Sharp, Brett Whitely, Peter Kingston and George Gittoes.

Part of the heritage negotiation of the Development Application process resulted in the requirement to integrate art into the building; this included an art gallery upon the ground floor and works by Michael Snape (working with Interior Architecture student Lucy Vader) and myself working with Matthew Johnson.

In this project the developer Mr. Philip Bartlett selected the artists and there was very little correspondence between he artists and the architect, Mr. Peter Reed.

The proposition given to Matthew was to design privacy/sun screens upon the western façade of the building.

Matthew developed a sketch of the screen proposal⁴. After discussion with Matthew regarding problems of crafting the screens by joiners or carpenters it was decided to alter the proposal. The number of joints was considered too many to economically craft the objects. After considering possibilities afforded by an agreed carpentry process Matthew came up with the final pattern of timber slates within the screens.

Work by myself then enabled the dynamic possibilities of the work to be communicated to all parties and the job carried through.

The end result is a work of enormous scale that effectively creates the character of the western façade of the building.

The screen, due to the glass doors forming the boundary of the interior behind, forms an interior filter to the outside. Again an interior/exterior blending is achieved.

3. Monument

Of the four projects discussed here the monument project was the most fraught and in many ways may have resulted in the “two corpses” outcome suggested by Brighton.

The management structure of the Monument project had built in issues that impacted upon the creative process and were ultimately difficult to overcome.

Wood Marsh Architects had devised the Development Application. Michael Crawford and Jennifer Turpin had negotiated the artist selection. The building was a partnership between Multiplex and Leon Fink. The working drawings and on site work was being carried out by Multiplex’s own architects.

My role as architect working with the artist was very difficult. This complex array of competing interests made for many issues.

An initial scheme was devised by Matthew and myself that was based upon Matthew’s interests in the relationships of repetitive coloured circles. At a presentation to Wood Marsh there was great resistance from the original architects who stated that their work was monochromatic.

For many reasons the work was shelved by Matthew Johnson and a new solution sought. Jennifer Turpin introduced Matthew to Paul Owen of Lighthouse and discussions about light emitting diodes (LED’s) ensued.

The possibility existed for the built work to be tonal rather than coloured while the artwork might be coloured and immutable.

The end result was that the work was incorporated into a light slot within the wall of the apartment foyer.

A continuous band of glass provided a “datum” or “building line” which provided an ordering statement within a space that was complex in plan and varied in level.

² Matthew has a strong interest in optical art, an art of optical illusion brought on by repetitive gestures of colour or shape.

³ Refer to Image One.

⁴ Refer to Image Seven

The proposal consisted of back lighting glass coloured by the application of a synthetic film to the rear . This was then lit by Red, Green, and Blue LED's. The lights were run to a program set by a computer with the sequence burned to a DVD. The final sequence set would not repeat over a five-year period. It may have been possible to extend this period to thirty years. The life of the LED's was estimated at fourteen years.

The value of the project was that it was essentially insubstantial. It created a transformation of the architecture by pursuing the essential element of architecture: light. The possibility of enormous variety created a strong temporal basis for the work.

The foyer, being located within a relatively quiet and dimly lit street off Sydney's Oxford Street, Darlinghurst, offered the possibility for this interior work to strongly engage with the civic setting of the foyer. This work was then offered to the then South Sydney City Council as an urban project.

4. Apelles Line, proposed Ivan Doherty Gallery, May 2007.

At the time of writing this work is still in development. Following work upon the Monument project the possibility of integrating Matthew's interest in Op Art with the use of sequenced LED's was an area offering creative potential. The work proposed for the Ivan Doherty exhibition varies from the Monument Foyer project. In 'Monument' the work was seen to be reliant upon the notion of coloured transitions offering an infinite sequence of colour combinations.

The Ivan Doherty show is interested in the notion of coloured transitions making the static appear dynamic, the intention at this stage is to make the coloured slot⁵ rotate behind the wall.

The role of the artist/architect collaboration here is to carry out research for work that might later be used in a larger urban setting; possibly producing dynamic affects upon city buildings or in suburban works such as freeways.

II. POSSIBILITIES FOR THE TEACHING OF INTERIOR ARCHITECTURE

Avoidance of the "twin corpses" phenomenon relies upon the integration of built form and artwork. Rather than just humanizing a space the artwork must react to spatial aspects of the enclosing space and work for the participant to create an experience.

"The field of architecture has recently made great strides in reaching out to other disciplines and relating more successfully to users, clients and the general public. This has no doubt played a part in artists; desire to work with architects. However, a significant factor in the growth of innovative collaborative practice between artists and architects is due to the rise of the "New Situationist"/a phrase

curator Clare Doherty uses to refer to artists who work beyond the confines of the gallery and studio and who use context as a impetus or research tool to make art" (Jes Fernie, 2006)

Each of the above built works endeavor to integrate artworks seamlessly within the respective buildings and have some notion of in, out, and in-between. Even the Ivan Doherty work proposes the "third space", that space that transitions between the inside and the outside. I believe such works are aligned with the "New Situationist" and pursue a practice as research approach while blurring boundaries and opening borders.

The lessons such practice offers the student of interior architecture are notions of contextualization and integration of work. The possibility that "the interior design" is more than just FF&E, furniture, fittings and equipment, but offers a chance to make a significant contribution to the phenomena experienced by the user of the building. The interior architect, like the artist integrating their work within a building, must collaborate.

The "in-between" areas of greatest friction also possess the greatest potential to offer ideas for interiors. Working in a collaborative manner, possibly necessitating aggressively exerting the right for collaborative working relationships, offers interior architects a basis for a proper professional role within the industry of the built environment. It frees them from restrictive borders upon action. Collaboration offers greater freedom.

Hence recognition in the interior architecture design studio of the importance of the contextual understanding of their work might form a basis for greater assertion on the part of the interior architecture student to pursue a wider field of action. Not only should the interior architect understand the spatial qualities of the space within which they work but they should understand it at an experiential level and endeavor to make a clear difference to the user's familiarity within the completed built space.

Notions of "the architecture" and the "interior" ultimately are restricted and suggest professional boundaries from the 19thC. Students should be encouraged to work without clearly defined boundaries while at the same time being limited only by an understanding of context.

Skills of persuasion, negotiation and the fostering of a sense of purpose in students is very important. They must feel entitled to assume a role of equality in the design team.

Secondly, collaborative work with artists suggests the possibility of space being "art"; it suggests an avenue of endeavor for the interior architect whereby they can extend the client's brief beyond the commercial concerns of function and into the realm of experience; possibly even delight. Certainly it offers the possibility of greater cultural participation by interior architects.

In the Glenroy project the architect has literally allowed the artist to fold his drawing from the outside and through the

⁵ Refer to Image Fourteen

interior of the building by integrating the work completely with the structural fabric of the building.

The Yellow House takes on the accepted Australian interest in the screen and develops this into an optical artwork that allows transformation of the façade of the building. The artwork becomes the façade.

The Monument foyer deals with the aspect of the temporal sequence or time based art: skirting notions of the infinite variability of colour. Of all the works this probably sits most comfortably into accepted norms of artistic and architectural roles.

Each of the works involved dealing with the third space of the professions. The in-between space that is so often the creative space of the interior architect.

The works are illustrative of the contextual circumstance in which interior architect's work. Even when working with older buildings interior architects must be aware of the aesthetic context upon their work. There are very few "blank slates".

The consequences of this for the Interior Architecture studio are that it provides examples of:

- i. Collaborative work and highlights the co-operative nature of early 21stC creative practice,
- ii. Integration of situational works into the broader buildings,
- iii. Challenges notions of the interior as simply *inside*,
- iv. Extends notions of decoration and fashion by highlighting the positive association that art movements have upon the contemporary environment,
- v. Suggests to students that they may practice in a broad cultural environment.

Not only does this work provide examples of collaboration it provides models for design studios and it raises issues regarding the nature of projects that might reasonably be undertaken by interior architecture students.

If we approached design like a love affair, allowing the open and equal exchange of ideas and responsibilities, we might just open ourselves to more fruitful outcomes.

III. Figures

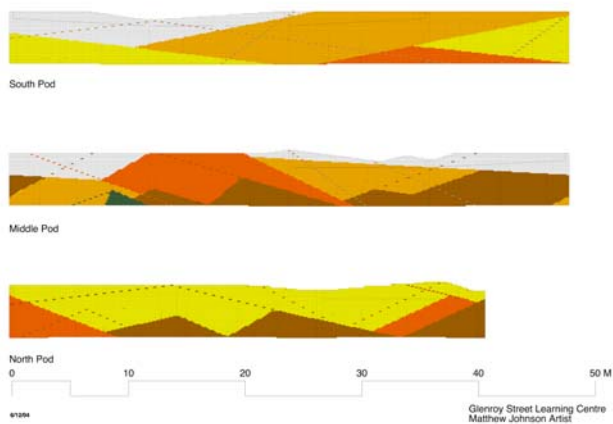


IMAGE ONE
GLENROY COMMUNITY CENTRE BRICK PATTERN
DRAWING



IMAGE TWO
GLENROY COMMUNITY CENTRE EXTERIOR

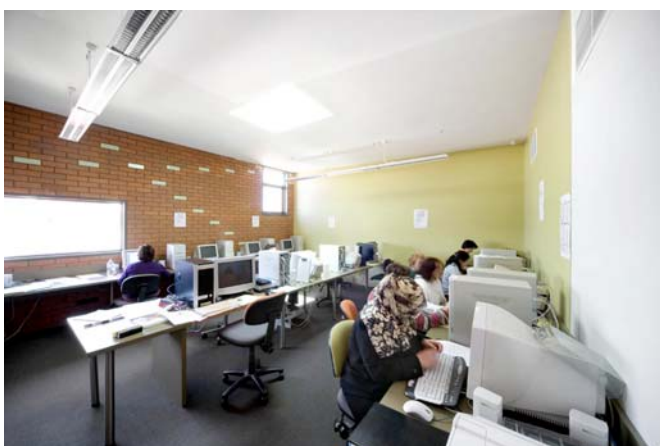


IMAGE THREE
GLENROY COMMUNITY CENTRE INTERIOR



IMAGE FOUR
GLENROY COMMUNITY CENTRE ENTRANCE



IMAGE FIVE
GLENROY COMMUNITY CENTRE EXTERIOR



IMAGE SIX
GLENROY COMMUNITY CENTRE EXTERIOR

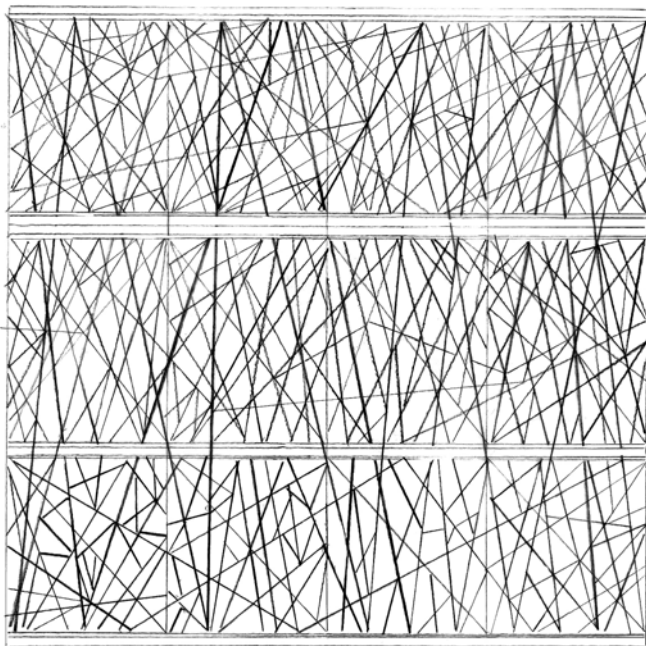


IMAGE SEVEN
YELLOWHOUSE ORIGINAL ARTWORK
MATTHEW JOHNSON ARTSIT



IMAGE EIGHT
YELLOW HOUSE WESTERN FACACDE
IMAGE THIRTEEN

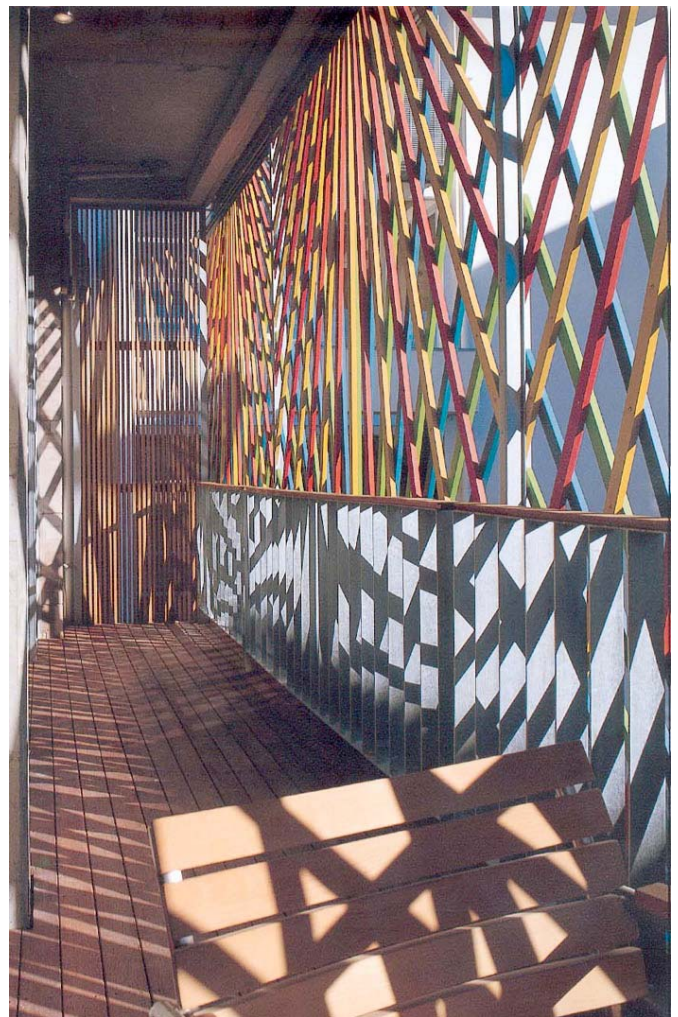


IMAGE NINE
YELLOW HOUSE INTERIOR VERANDAH



IMAGE TEN
MONUMENT ORIGINAL FOYER SCHEME

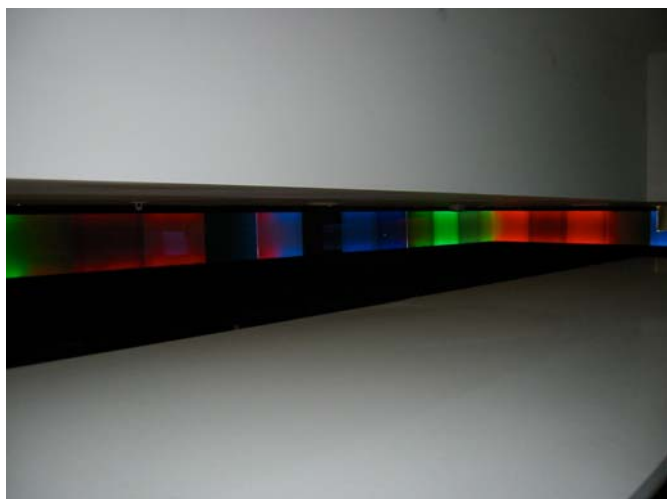


IMAGE ELEVEN
MONUMENT FOYER INTERIOR



IMAGE TWELVE
MONUMENT FOYER INTERIOR



IMAGE THIRTEEN
MONUMENT FOYER INTERIOR

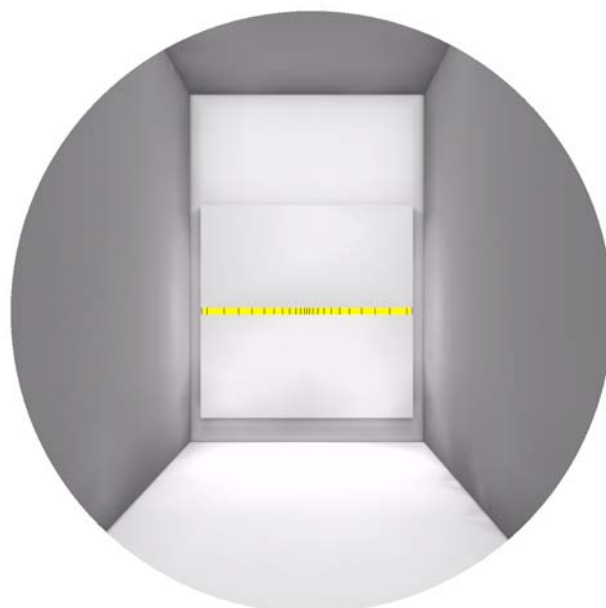


IMAGE FOURTEEN
APELLES LINE, PROPOSAL FOR IVAN DOHERTY
GALLERY

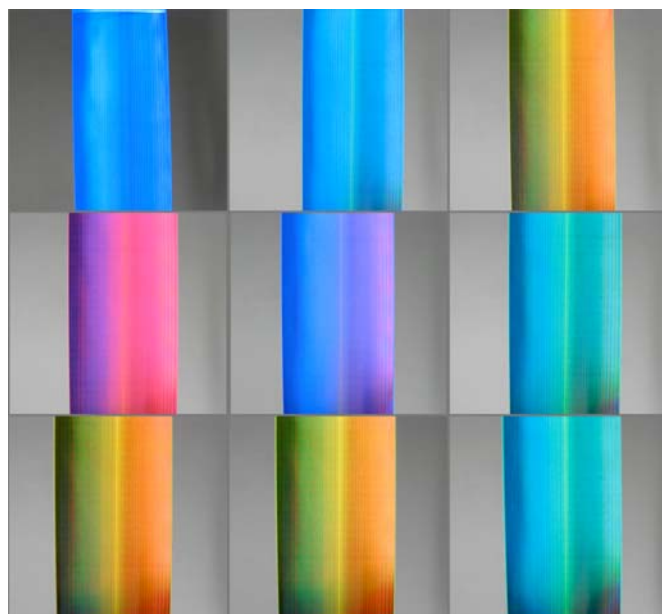


IMAGE FIFTEEN
RESEARCH IMAGE FROM APELLES LINE PROCESS

IV. CITING PREVIOUS WORK

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Photos of the Glenroy Community Centre courtesy of McGauren Gianni Soon architects.

Photos of Monument foyer courtesy of Multiplex

Yellow house artwork by Matthew Johnson

Computer renderings by Bill MacMahon

Drawing of brick pattern by Bill MacMahon

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