

DESIGN WITH REAL PEOPLE

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01. THE STATE OF THE ART

Much of the ongoing work of constructing a discipline of landscape architecture is churned along by debate over the question

When, in a world of many cruel contingencies, is action justified?

More than the other design disciplines we are concerned foundationally with balancing the benefits and costs of **taking action**, and there's no doubt this painstaking (and sometimes painful) balancing act costs us chances at power.

Nonetheless we are proud designers, – **doers** – inescapably compromised optimists who can't help but smile with mixed contrition and pride on reading Robert Smithson rubbishing a landscape painter:

'One wonders what the likes of Gussow [20th century American abstract realist] would make of America's first "earthworks artist" – Frederick Law Olmstead. Perhaps, if Gussow had lived in the mid-19th century, he would have suggested that Olmstead write "lyric poetry" instead of moving ten million horse-cart loads of earth to make central park. Artists like Gussow are a type who would rather retreat to scenic beauty spots than try to make a concrete dialectic between nature and people. Such an artist surrounds himself with self-righteousness and pretends to be saving the landscape. This is not being an ecologist of the real, but rather, a spiritual snob.' ¹

We are Olmstead but we are also Gussow. On the one hand we actively seek out power and are perennially frustrated by our failure to secure it.

'I just told someone I was a landscape architect and they asked me if I could do their garden' is the catchcry of a profession embarrassingly pre-disposed to *little guy* self-pity.

Yet the surrender of power, of stepping back from design as grand narrative, also forms a significant strand of the professional discourse.

We see this particularly on the more ecological and pseudo-ecological wing of the profession where the championing of novel and spontaneous 'ecologies' has informed and inspired large sections of the profession for decades. ²

For me, a landscape architecture student in the final weeks of my masters, the question of where, **given a will to action, action can be justified** captures something of the discipline and is a theme against which the work below plays out.

02. CARTOON PEOPLE BEGET CARTOON LANDSCAPES

Peter Connolly (23 years ago in this same publication) wrote in warning of the insidious and ‘colonising ... drawing conventions’ that ‘mark and order the page’³ on which we designers work even before an investigation of a site begins.

Today I find it difficult to think of a drawing convention more deadening, congealed and presumptuous than what I call ‘Design with Lumion and High-Income Nuclear Families’.



This render of the Fitzroy Gassworks redevelopment project by Yarra City Council, Development Victoria & The Victorian State Government is typical of this type of drawing. We're presented with a landscape designed for and populated by young professionals, nuclear families, and young people exercising. No other mode of existence figures, apparently.

This is an aesthetic that permeates the profession. It's what Richard Weller was talking about when making the observation that most landscape architecture drawings are

*'expressed primarily through carefully choreographed images of healthy, happy people immersed in pristine, naturalistic landscapes.'*⁴

Is this action justified?

Certainly to define public space in terms of a few privileged sets of *users* and what you've presupposed these users enjoy (or worse need) is to carve off a huge amount of power for the landscape architect, is to take significant unilateral action.

That's not to say it can't be justified, rather that when it becomes convention it routinely isn't.

03. DESIGN WITH MINIATURES

My masters thesis project is called *Design with Real People* - and it looks to construct broader and more inclusive ways of working with public space than literally defining it in terms of select *users* and the *programme* that designers apparently know in advance is what these *users* want.

To achieve this I've drawn on a series of **miniatures** called *The Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death* by Forensics pioneer Frances Glessner Lee.



Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death, Red Room. Courtesy Lorie Shaull.

These Nutshell Studies are a series of roughly 2 dozen murder scenes recreated by Glessner Lee in incredible detail – down to the patterns on curtains – as a pedagogical tool for training detectives in the Baltimore Police Department in strategies for forensic problem solving.

Essential to this pedagogy is that these scenarios are unsolvable.⁵ Glessner Lee has materially heightened their ambiguity by adding, removing, and moving objects to make it actually impossible to solve the scenario with the information provided. The point here is that cultivating critical investigatory skills was judged more important than arriving at a *theydunit* conclusion.

From this my research draws the key insight that the construction of space doesn't need to be about communicating a coherent narrative formulated through a designer's (usually weirdly puritanical) ethic. Rather material interventions in scenarios **can actually be designed to be ambiguous**, to surrender to but still cultivate a curious and constructive unfolding relation between people and place.

04. A CASE STUDY

For my research I've worked with miniatures not unlike Gessner Lee's at a play space in the Hardy Gallagher Reserve along the Park Street Bike path in Melbourne's inner North.

The play space is a typical highly programmed place in which the role of the landscape architect has at once been **elevated** to prescribing exactly how children should engage with site via incredibly specifically programmed play elements while also being **lowered** to a job a computer could do if anyone ever bothered to teach it – of selecting off-shelf play elements designed by others, setting them out so their fall zones don't overlap, and bounding them in a clearly delineated timber edge that holds softfall mulch and play **in** and keeps grass and any other conceivable mode of engagement **out**.



Typical play space at the Hardy Gallagher Reserve. My Photo.

Working with miniatures has given me the opportunity to engage in a dialogue with these existing conditions.

Gianne Bouchard, writing on the Nutshell Studies in *Performance and Research*, illuminates this process.

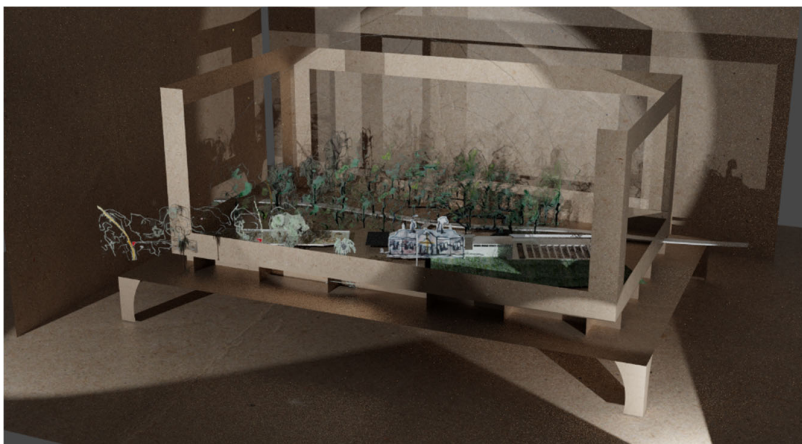
*'It might be that the Nutshell Studies and other forensic models offer a particular form of optics as a "politics of positioning", through trying to undermine the normative locus of the "dominator" in subtle ways.'*⁶

And indeed this is how my miniatures work to construct an alternative representation of public space stripped of as many of those typical drawing conventions and hierarchies as possible.

In 1986 Ursula Le Guin wrote that

*'the natural, proper, fitting shape of the novel might be that of a sack, a bag'*⁷

And that's certainly the shape the Hardy Gallagher Reserve takes when I work with it in miniature.



My miniature of the Hardy Gallagher Reserve builds site up as if it were jumbled together in a sack or a bag. This aesthetic crutch primes a landscape architect for engaging constructively with existing site material and programs to broaden the ways in which visitors can interact with them. I would not have been able to think this way in plan or section.

This alternative process for constructing and investigating site has resulted in interventions that encourage a re-evaluative engagement with existing elements on site.

Nothing is demolished here, rather the knowledge of site gleaned from building it up in miniature is translated into proposals that open the site up, acknowledging programmed elements but offering a broader range of ways to engage with, traverse, and understand these elements of site.



This collaged miniature shows a proposed intervention to the reserve where the timber edging bounding the play space has been removed, large clamberable planters punctuate the edge of the play space and new balance beams introduce ambiguous ways to traverse site. These modest, buildable alterations will cultivate eccentric traversal – thereby broadening the site's capacity to accommodate a wide and genuinely diverse range of users.

06. DESIGN WITH A BACKBONE

I hope this case study examples the value of designing ambiguous interventions into public space that surrender the authority of interpretation back to users.

I hope also that I've made the case that we landscape architects must remain vigilant of the temptation to *programme*— narrative will always drive the inner face of our work but when we let the stories we tell ourselves restrict the way people can relate to public space we overstep a key ethical bound that leaves our shared public spaces more exclusionary, majoritarian and dull.

But in working against these typical representational aesthetics I'm trying to make a broader point too.

Richard Weller argues that

'Global landscape architecture desperately needs designers who are willing to take intellectual or creative risks based on a critical appreciation of precedent.' ⁸

And I hope my case study examples a *process* working in that spirit.

Do I think everyone should design with miniatures? Of course not, **that too would be majoritarian and dull.**

But is it every landscape architect's responsibility to draw critically on a wide range of precedents to work against the dull and oppressive scourge presumptuous, repetitious and (worst of all) barely-self-aware representational techniques?

That one, dear reader, I'll leave up to you.

1486 (incl. captions)

1. Smithson, Robert, 'Fredrick Law Olmstead and the Dialectical Landscape', in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (USA, 1996), 164.

The case for the establishment of curious and constructive conversations between people and places.

2. Weller, Richard, 'The Speculating Animal' (Public Talk, Illinois College of Fine arts, 2021)

For a clear description of the 'Rewilds' a strand of landscape architects concerned specifically with nature at a distance, with which humans interact via 'boardwalks, visitor centres and the act of passive observation'.

3. Connolly, Peter, 'What Is at Hand?', *KERB*, 6 (1999), 70–83

A clear description of the way received drawing conventions and norms frame our perspective on a place before we even begin site analysis.

4. Weller, Richard, 'Planet Photoshop', *Landscape Architecture (China)*, 04 (2015), 86–88

The case for individual work that develops an individual aesthetic from the critical study of precedent.

5. Marks, Susan, 'Of Dolls & Murder', *Of Dolls & Murder* (USA, 2012)

On Frances Glessner Lee's practice, particularly her Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death.

6. Bouchard, Gianna, 'Murder in Miniature', *Performance & Research*, 24/5 (2019), 93–100

On how Frances Glessner Lee's Nutshell Studies leverage the aesthetic of miniatures to invest representations with a particularly potent destabilising element.

7. Le Guin, Ursula, 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction', 1986

The case for being wary of grand narrative.

8. Ibid 4.