

# Text as a Site of Cultural Discourse

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses a series of charrette exercises aimed at encouraging the utilization of difference in the design studio. Contexts for architectural investigations were embedded in fiction that is grounded in Caribbean and Latin American cultural environments. The charrette used literary texts to provide a "landscape" where the design served as an "infill," a homeplace within an interpreted setting. During the charrette students used praxis<sup>1</sup> to investigate meanings of multiculturalism and diversity<sup>2</sup> in architecture.

To establish a platform for the "other," students were exposed to phenomena and structures of intercultural processes. Their own identities were affirmed in their design solutions. As two ethnic minority women who are architectural educators, we already recognized that identity is, in the least, subconsciously inscribed in one's design work. Nevertheless, the charrette provoked critical<sup>3</sup> analysis and posed important questions that considered ethnicity, class, and gender within the realm of architectural design. Some of the ways cultural societies and individuals are implicitly and explicitly portrayed by architecture is visible in the work generated by the charrette.

"This is an intervention. A message from that space in the margin that is a site of creativity and power, that inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity to erase the category colonized/colonizer. Marginality as a site of resistance. Enter that space. Let us meet there.

We are transformed, individually, collectively, as we make radical creative space which affirms and sustains our subjectivity, which gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world."<sup>4</sup>

## CULTURAL HIBRIDITY, ISOLATION AND "OTHERNESS"

Design can dispel or reinforce myths about the "other." When architecture is approached from a position of critical

analysis that raises questions about cultural identity (ethnicity, ancestry, religion, language, and class and gender) we begin to uncover links between design decisions and the designer's world view. Understanding where and how one's own perceptions about environments are based is a logical beginning point in considering how other individuals and cultural societies are implicitly and explicitly portrayed by architecture. Pedagogical practices in architecture, however, continue to disproportionately engage traditional frameworks. This kind of hegemony denies the cultural hybridity among students and allows cultural isolation to shape their professional preparation.

How does the physical environment reflect the uniqueness of a culture and in what ways do intercultural processes result in cultural hybridity? Different historic and socio-economic circumstances determine what and by which means various cultural groups have the strongest influence on local lifestyles and environments. This point is well illustrated by Jessica B. Harris, in *Iron Pots and Wooden Spoons* as she discusses the interwoven relationships between settlement patterns, economic structure and architectural site (space) in the transfer of cooking customs that traveled from Africa and Europe to the New World:

"The next major upheaval that would allow African cooking to branch out and tap even deeper into cooking in the New World was the Atlantic slave trade. This largest forced migration in the history of mankind would transport untold numbers of African slaves from all areas of the continent into the New World where conditions of servitude would result more often than not in their being responsible for the cooking in the big house of the countries to which they were sent. Their service in the kitchen would directly and subtly influence the tastes of most of the New World. Their cooking would become the basis for a variety of New World cuisines that triumphantly mixed the cooking methods of the Old World, Africa, with the culinary bounty of the Americas, cuisines that were informed in each spot of the map of the New

World by the cooking styles of local European settlers."

Cooking practices of the Caribbean are often referred to as "Creole," a term which designates the result of interaction between two cultural origins that are African and European. Although it was originally applied to language by anthropologists, Creole has become the classification that describes whole cultural settings as well as particular phenomena, including architecture.

The clear impacts of specific cultural groups and the cultural hybridity that exists within the Caribbean presents an excellent opportunity to examine how cultural meaning is expressed in landscapes and architecture. An amalgamation once necessary now constitutes a richly diverse environment.

Latin America can be a reductionist concept when used to designate a wide variety of histories, cultures, peoples, and landscapes. Some scholars<sup>5</sup> find its definition in questions of opposition and expectations of "otherness." When applied to the art world, an art critic<sup>6</sup> decries it as a "dangerous ghettoisation, an exclusion from the world of 'mainstream art'." When used to define the identity of people, it submerges uniqueness under bold classification~.~

More appropriately, Latin America can serve as an orientation device when referring to a region that shares historical, political, and economic characteristics. The most evident are: invasion and destruction of indigenous political structures; a systematic effort to propagate the Catholic faith; a tension between metropolis and new territory; a production exploitation system based on slavery; and a society formed by varying combinations of indigenous, expatriate, and hybrid populations.<sup>8</sup>

Although all of the Western hemisphere has long been designated as America, the U.S. infers the noun as theirs alone. The relationship between the Americas is characterized by a constant bi-directional transfer of raw materials, products, ideas, and people. This movement has generated a culture of "fusion" in many Latin American nations as well as in the United States. Cross-cultural currents are evidenced by the "latinization" phenomenon whereby "elements of Latin American cultures are imported into the U.S. culture and daily practices."<sup>9</sup> This process — the promotion of multiculturalism and ethnicity — has resulted in great measure from the commodification of culture to capture larger consumer markets.

## FICTION AS A RESOURCE FOR DESIGN

Writers build with words, architects with images, models, and text. However, the resulting literary and architectural spaces have different goals. The former begins and ends with the imagination, the latter exists in the real world as material objects. As in architecture, literary spaces can be classified by types: spaces of the mind, or psycho-emotional spaces; spaces with geographical identity; imaginary spaces concretely described but completely made-up; and "edifices" or

spaces for memory that serve as philosophical constructs. Fictional spaces, real or imaginary, are generally hybrids.<sup>10</sup> Fiction reflects human experience in its portrayal of life, and makes manifest architecture as a mediating device between the subject and the natural world. Critics discuss technology and culture as two distinct entities moving at different speeds." The dichotomy perhaps explains why when seen through literature, architecture is taken as an essential background, but not as a central concern. Yet, it is precisely this apparent peripheral condition which makes literary texts very valuable in relating ways of living and perceiving to techno-cultural products such as architecture.<sup>12</sup>

Fact and fiction have been traditionally synonymous with true and false, or real and imaginary. How then can it be argued that fiction can provide a landscape for studying design in the world of reality?. Before proceeding any further, it is necessary to introduce specific examples of mechanisms used by contemporary fiction writers. Edward Said affirms that texts have a personality and are influenced by the conflicts of the time that have brought them forth.<sup>13</sup> Any text, factual or fictional, constitutes an interpretation of reality. In that sense, fact and fiction are equally true. Darko Surkin<sup>14</sup> contends that although "people cannot be represented in fiction because they are either exemplary or shifting nodes of narration", their relationships can be represented. This allows the reader to reconnect them with the world of people and things."

Literary texts were also particularly fitting as potential sites because, as Edward Said points out, "narrative fiction becomes the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their history."<sup>16</sup> For many Caribbean, Central and South America writers, literature serves as an empowering means of dealing with crucial political, social, and cultural questions. Nevertheless, particular attention should be paid to the processes through which literary production is exported and translated.<sup>17</sup> These often impose a type of censorship<sup>18</sup> over the voices that are heard abroad.

The charrette's texts were written by Gioconda Belli, Erna Brodber, Carlos Fuentes, and Paule Marshall. Belli is Nicaraguan and Fuentes Mexican. Both writers are considered members of the intellectual elites in their respective countries. Belli lives in California and Fuentes travels frequently to the U.S., where his work is widely read. Belli's novel, *Inhabited Woman*,<sup>19</sup> tells the story of a young woman who enters the ranks of the architectural profession in Managua during the Nicaraguan civil war. The book was first published in English in 1994. It has been criticized for the superficial characterization of the poor.

"In a Flemish Garden"<sup>20</sup> by Carlos Fuentes is the story of a man seduced by and trapped in an old mansion in Mexico City. The story was translated into English in 1969. Carlos Fuentes has been referred to as a 'mandarin' whose national position contradicts his opposition to U.S. intervention in Latin America, his criticism of late capitalism, and his multicultural connections.<sup>21</sup>

Erna Brodber's *Jane and Louise Will Soon Come Home*<sup>22</sup> is a series of stories that take place in Kingston, Jamaica. One of the selections tells about life in a government yard; the other, explores the concept of the kumbla, a protected intangible personal space with clear African origins. Paule Marshall, who traces her heritage to Barbados, is the author of *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*.<sup>23</sup> She has published widely, and has taught at several universities in the U.S. Her work is known for the exploration of three main themes: the African Diaspora, tension between cultures, and site and its relationship to culture. This novel deals with the conflict between wealthy developers and less privileged long-time inhabitants of a fictitious island.

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The charrette began as a two-week investigation conducted by the facilitators through e-mail exchanges and a video lecture. This was followed by a week-long on-site visit.<sup>24</sup> Charrette exercises provided an opportunity to engage issues of ethnicity, class, and gender through the exploration of culture, space, and identity. Instructions called for design decisions that had to be rendered quickly, and depended greatly on intuition. During the various stages, students were asked to respond to the design context, both individually and as teams.

Design production centered on the investigation of homeplaces: their relationship to adjacent public realms, and their architectural expressions. Of the many archetypal spaces, those of the home require the most personal input and mediation between poles of positionality: insider/outsider, friend/foe, protected/exposed, observer/observed, hidden/visible, open/closed, native/alien, public/private, etc.

The first stage, conducted long distance, required students to form teams. Each team was requested to study one of four texts to arrive at a collaborative constructed context. Each individual was to generate three perspectives accompanied by text. Students were to conceive process and presentation so that individual parts formed a total integrated "team" piece. The media and technique were to result from a compromise between individuals within their teams. The charrette critics provided examples of the type of work expected.<sup>25</sup> Criteria to be used in assessing the quality of the work was also clearly defined.<sup>26</sup>

The second part of the charrette, conducted after the critics' arrival, asked students to identify the location of their individual "infill" within the context, generate a narrative architectural program, and design the homeplace(s) in their designated cultural landscape(s)/site. Models were excluded as a presentation option to avoid reducing the project to "precious object generation." However, upon arrival, the critics discovered that the "team" piece had taken the place of the sacred object usually reserved for the models. A change in the sequence of exercises was made to reinstate the focus of the charrette.

The revised charrette instructions asked students to

continue working in teams. However, individual efforts were to be clearly defined with hard boundaries and guided by a discrete set of instructions. Each student would produce a 2'-0" X 6'-0" panel. This synthesis had to respect sky and earth, and to provide a sense of "here," "there," and "beyond." When put together, panels would form a continuous image, or mural. Team members had to coordinate continuity of content and select the presentation media. Students were asked to complete a mock up with their team members during class. Additionally, they were asked to begin thinking about their individual narrative programs.

Before giving a definite form to their design ideas, students were asked to choose a site for their design within their team's mural. The design presentation consisted of two boards. A fragment of space of the proposed homeplace was to be presented in a one-point section perspective on a 2'-0" X 2'-6" board. This representation had to be spatially rich by including qualitative attributes such as structure, materials, texture, shade and shadow. It was to also include a realistically depicted human figure. The fragment would be large enough to make an engaged audience feel as though s/he was part of the spatial depictions.

A smaller board, 2'-0" X 1'-6" would graphically express the nature of the design's "spatial feeling." It was to be overlaid with excerpts taken from an individual's narrative program. The images should not be figurative, or be drawn using architectural drawing conventions.

## ANALYSIS OF THE WORK GENERATED

Student responses to the instructions and activities of the charrette appeared to be engendered by two main factors. The first, and most immediately obvious, were their collective notions about what is abstract and what is real in architectural gestures. The second was the impact of student's individual world views, and their ethno-cultural identities. Their work was also affected by the critics' reactions and instructions, and by students' personal choice and ability. The nature of the studio working environment obscured some of the themes (i.e. gender, ethnicity, class) that were made explicit through the charrette exercises.

Stage One asked teams to construct the project's context from text. This relied upon group agreement and individual production. The work was conducted prior to critics arriving at their school. Surprisingly, the results were generally very abstract. Earlier in the semester, and independent of the charrette, students had read Arnheim's "What Abstraction Is Not, What Abstraction Is." Their perceptions of how to proceed were clearly embedded in studio precedence. Reaction to one project was based upon a prior reading that was intended to set the tone for visual perception and understanding. Students were not experienced in the given contexts of Latin America and the Caribbean. Although, they were provided with visual examples of those environments and commentary on them by the charrette's introductory video, they chose to react with their already familiar thoughts about

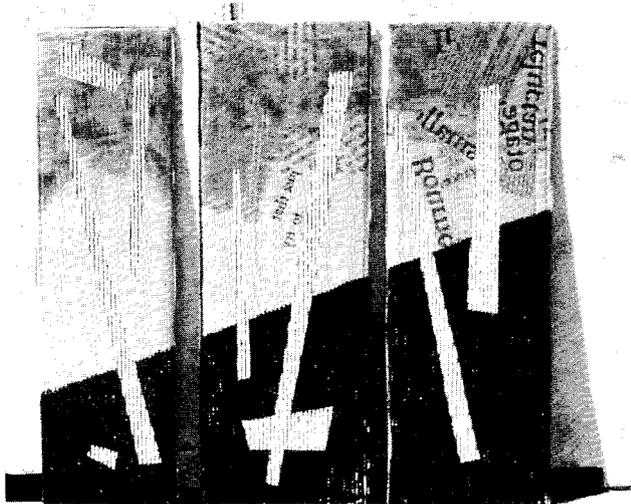


Fig. 1. Individual submission, Stage One. (Eric Rauser)

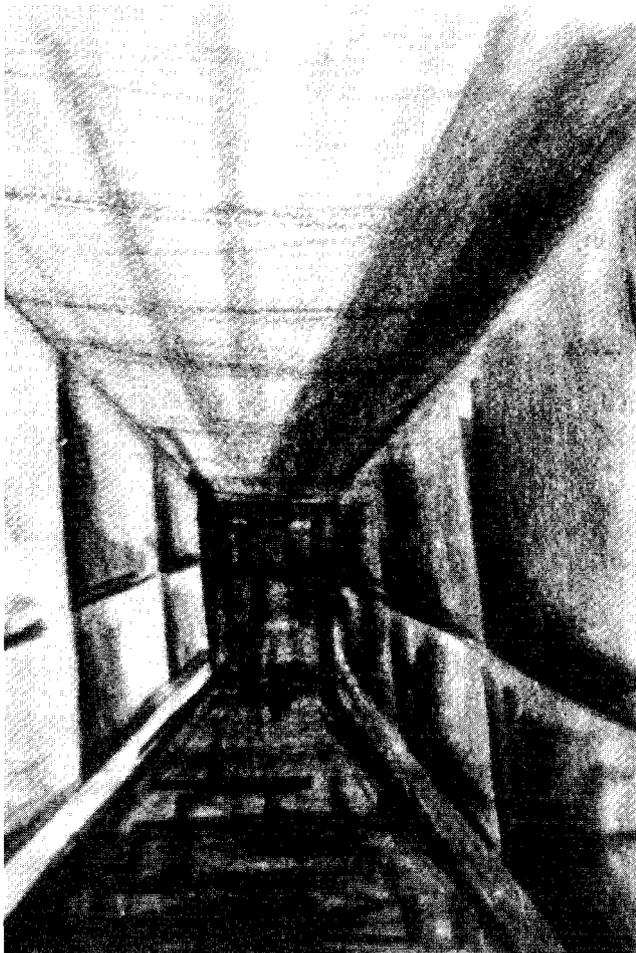


Fig. 2. Individual submission, Stage One. (Candace Romero)

perceptions of abstraction. Students seemingly wanted to do what they thought was right, expected, and safe (i.e. hegemonic positioning). Their relationship to the text, its context, was extraneous. Their relationship to each other as a group was rather similar.

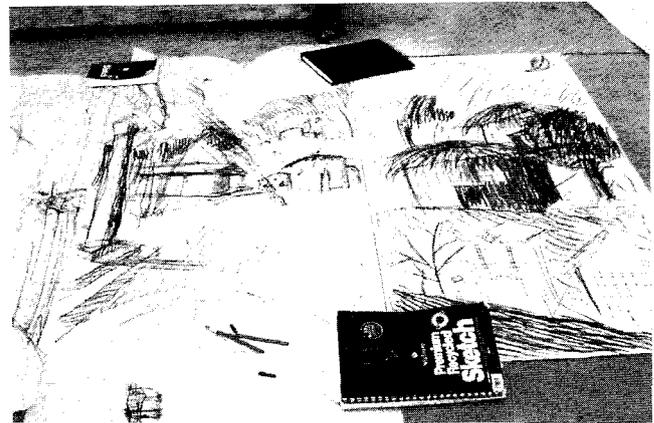


Fig. 3. Mural "mock-up" (Team Work)

With few exceptions, students' reaction to stage one seemed politically motivated and individualistic. Meaningful levels of investigation were reserved for individual reactions. Competency was determined by the quality of the visual.

The generally abstract qualities of this work was acceptable by the critics. However, the apparent degree of collaborative effort and attempts to engage any meaningful exploration of the given contexts needed more effort. Students were coaxed by changes in the expected instructions which had been set for phase two. Murals which depict the context at a very large scale were requested. Each person was responsible for a panel of the mural and each group's mural was to contain at least one recognizable datum.

Students worked collaboratively on the murals as requested. Their actions and comments expressed comfort in the more didactic instructions - being told exactly what to do (descriptive articulation of a context) and how to do it (as a mural of a specific size). Simultaneously, they seemed freed to operate at a deeper level of exploration with regard to interpretations of the given contexts. Given explicit rules for content and format for communication, students were more willing to work together for a common, related end. What had been perceived as necessarily competitive became appropriately collaborative. What had been disguised in the use of (dis)ingenious symbolism was allowed to be revealed. The murals were beautifully depicted, thoughtfully interpreted spatial descriptions. Most revealing, they were collaborative in nature and yet respectfully individual.

The studio remained a political arena, (i.e. who was marginalized, and who was not, a structure set up by virtue of the nature of the profession, and who was serving as critic) yet the project was depoliticized in this restructured step. Everyone felt enabled and empowered.

The next step of the charrette reinstated a concentration on individual response. The canons that established what was important and what was not were changed from that which seemed to shroud students' initial work. Student were given instructions to respond individually, abstractly, (spatial feeling board) and figuratively (spatial fragment). The students' world views (ethnic identities) became an explicit

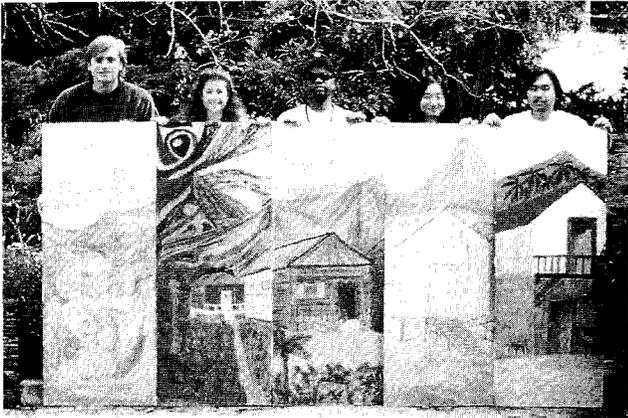


Fig. 4. Mural for *Jane & Louise Will Soon Come Home*. (Team Work)

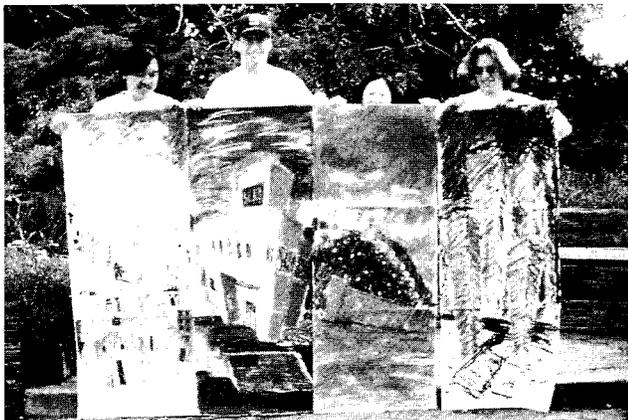


Fig. 5. Mural for *In a Flemish Garden*. (Team Work)

element in their responses. Also, their reading of the given contexts became more substantive, even when intended to be symbolic, rather than figuratively explicit.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The charrette used difference as a way to explore the meanings of multiculturalism and diversity. Students were to adopt a critical attitude based on praxis: unity of reflection and action. They were asked to approach the project by referencing positionality to the texts they had read, and to utilize those texts as sources for the design.<sup>27</sup> Searching for the answer to the question: Do I place myself inside or outside the text? they were to establish a platform for the "other". Paraphrasing bell hooks, students were "to enter an inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity."

The lessons of the charrette were hidden in the way architectural production is usually managed: approaches to design, power structures, saints and rebels, rights and wrongs. Studio culture promotes ways of perceiving and interpreting the world of traditional hegemonic structures. It sets the tone for what it produces. As text, studios have personalities. Together, teachers and students must uncover the ideologies



Fig. 6. *Space and Feeling: Jane & Louise Will Soon Come Home*. (Candace Romero)

that lurk behind their work, the language, and the setting for their interaction. In order to understand and transform, we need to build not only common ground for discussion, but an open one.

The charrette project had to adjust to the reality collaboratively constructed by the critics and the students. Before attempting to address the design issues, the studio had to restructure itself to allow for collective responses, empowering those that had been silenced. Responses to the project were initially based on the usual expectations of "otherness:" modern/traditional, natural/artificial, confined/free, folkloric/radical, primitive/civilized. Students became involved with the protagonists of the drama, rather than with the sense of place. The texts were seen as "sparks," and not as sites. As the charrette evolved becoming increasingly depoliticized, projects gained in depth, became less symbolic, less geometrical, and more experientially and sensorially aware. Culture exposes itself as a dynamic force.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The charrette was part of the California Polytechnic State University: San Luis Obispo, Department of Architecture Visiting Fel-



Fig. 8. Space and Feeling: *In a Flemish Garden*. (Julia Yi)

<sup>6</sup> See Baddley  
<sup>7</sup> For example, Guatemala's indigenous groups speak 23 different regional tongues. Yet, autochthonous cultures all the way from North to South America are categorized homogeneously as "Indians". See Clifford Krauss, "Guatemala's War: Ideology as the Latest Excuse", *The New York Times*, 9 April 1995.  
<sup>8</sup> Based on Darcy Ribeiro's classification: new people, witnessing people, transplanted people.  
<sup>9</sup> Celeste Olalquiaga refers to cultural appropriation and transformation in Latin America as "recycling", and to culture as a "duty-free space". For Olalquiaga, this trend remind us that "postindustrialism is not exclusively a metropolitan phenomenon." See Celeste Olalquiaga, *Megalopolis*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), p. 75-76. Jorge Francisco Liemur, an Argentinian architect, conceives the borrowing from established dominant cultures as a problem engendered by "modernity". "I believe that the massive consumption of these norms [foreign aesthetics and theories] and the simultaneous generation of ruptures and alternatives are two parts of the same problem, both a general consequence of modernity." See Jorge Francisco Liemur, "Letter from Buenos Aires" in *Any*, no. 10, 1995. George Yudice agrees proposing that "Latin American cultural experiences constitute alternate ways of being Western." See George Yudice, "We Are Not the World", *Social Text*, 31/32 (1992), p. 202.  
<sup>10</sup> Toni Morrison in the essay "The Site of Memory" offers a description of how to construct a place: "It's a kind of literary

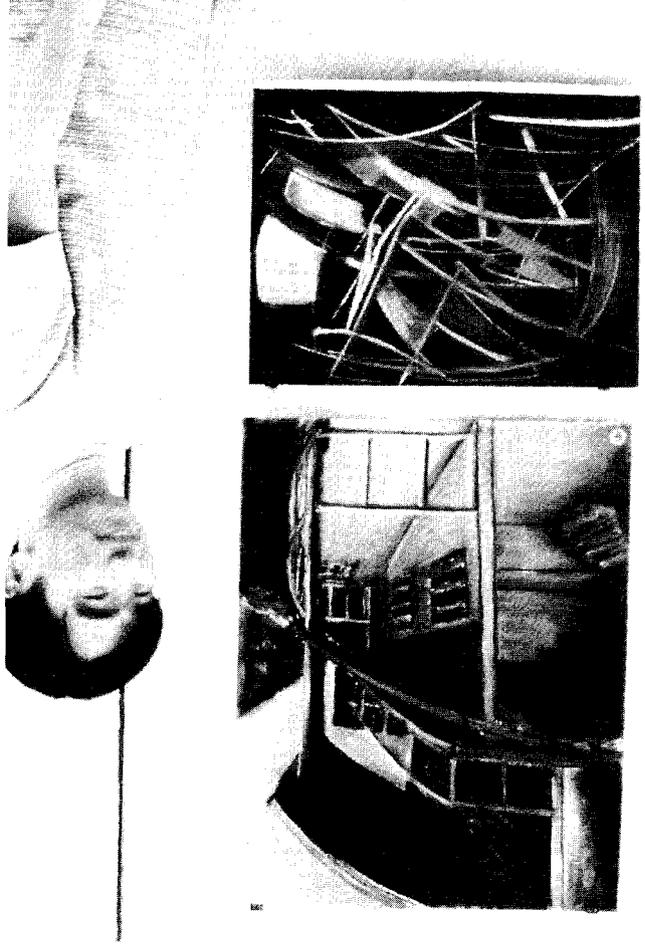


Fig. 7. Space and Feeling: *Inhabited Woman*. (Paul Wang)

<sup>1</sup> "[Praxis is] unity of action and reflection by which a man or a woman who transforms the world is transformed." Paulo Freire, *The Politics of Education*, (Massachusetts: Bergin and Garvey Publishers, 1985), p. 112.  
<sup>2</sup> "Diversity as a fundamental structure is not about demolishing, but rather about letting diverse identities be, and consequently, it is not about concealed processes, but about revealing ourselves in relation. In this acknowledgment of diversity, educational power shifts from an emphasis on controlling others to the power of restraint." Ali F. Faramawy, *Rites of Passage: The Making of a Professional Architect*, Doctoral Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1988, p. 237.  
<sup>3</sup> "By critical I mean a philosophy that is aware of the limits of knowledge", Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "More on Power/Knowledge", in *Outside the Teaching Machine*, (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 25.  
<sup>4</sup> bell hooks, *Yearning: race, gender, and cultural politics*, (Boston: South and Press, 1990), p. 152-153.  
<sup>5</sup> See Oriana Baddley, Introduction to "New Art from Latin America: Explaining the Continent" in *AD*, (London: Academy Editions, 1994); and Kurt Hollander, ed., *The Portable Lower East Side*, (New York, 1988.), p. 159.

- archeology: on the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site [a discrete place in memory, not necessarily a physical location] to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply." See Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory", in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, eds., Russell Ferguson et al. (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art; Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1994), 4th printing.
- <sup>11</sup> See Bernard Stiegler, "Developing Deterritorialization" in *Any*, no.3, Nov/Dec. 1993.
- <sup>12</sup> "By looking at the way that technology is treated in fiction we come to a clearer understanding of the societies which it has shaped and of effects and consequences of which we are scarcely conscious, so subtly are they concealed." See Jane Robinett. *This rough magic: technology in Latin American fiction*, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1994).
- <sup>13</sup> Said proposes that, "there is no such thing as a direct experience or reflection, of the world in the language of the text." See Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, (New York: Alfred A. Knoff, 1993), p.67
- <sup>14</sup> Darko Surkin, "Can People be (Re)presented in Fiction?", in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*.
- <sup>15</sup> On the issue of veracity, Toni Morrison explains that in fiction "nothing needs to be publicly verifiable, although much in it can be verified." See Morrison, p.302.
- <sup>16</sup> Said, p.xii
- <sup>17</sup> Garcia Canclini, Néstor. "Memory and Innovation in the Theory of Art", *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, Summer 1993, vol.92, no.3, pp.423.
- <sup>18</sup> Garcia Canclini.
- <sup>19</sup> Gioconda Belli, *The Inhabited Woman*, (Willimantic, Connecticut: Curbstone Press, 1989).
- <sup>20</sup> Carlos Fuentes, "In a Flemish Garden", *Burnt Water*, trans. Margaret Sayers Peden (New York: Noonday Press, 1993), 5th printing.
- <sup>21</sup> Yúdice.
- <sup>22</sup> Erna Brodber, *Jane and Louise Will Soon Come Home*, (London: New Beacon Books, 1980). Brodber is a sociologist and professor, and intended the book to be used by sociology students as an alternative sociological research method. The author describes her work as having "activist intentions." See Erna Brodber, "Fiction in the Scientific Procedure", in *Caribbean Women Writers*, ed., Selwyn R. Cudjoe, (Wellesley, Massachusetts: Calaloux Publications, 1990), pp.164.
- <sup>23</sup> Paule Marshall, *The Chosen Place, Timeless People*, (Vintage, 1992).
- <sup>24</sup> Prior to the "Text as a Site" charrette students had participated in a competition focusing "on ideas and forms that act as bridges between the head and the heart." The main thesis of this program was that "places are best understood through a non-rational response or feeling." (Taken from Program for the 1995/1996 Stephen O. Anderson Scholarship Competition, "The architectural para-site project," Teddy Cruz and Hector Perez (OdA)). It reinforced Carlos Fuentes' notion of difference and community: "No culture retains its identity in isolation. Identity is attained in contact, contrast and in breakthrough." The project, asked for a temporary, demountable structure that would travel as an exhibition of student work. Luis Barragán and Mathias Goeritz five towers (1957) at the entrance to the satellite city in Naupalcan, Mexico was the test site. The students had also completed a series of readings as part of the studio requirements. Some of these were: Rudolf Amheim "What Abstraction Is Not, What Abstraction Is;" El Lissitzky "Proun;" John Hejduk "The Flatness of Depth;" Mario Gandelsona *The Urban Text*, Moore-Allen *Dimensions: Space, Shape, Scale*; Moore-Lyndon *Chambers For a Memory Palace*.
- <sup>25</sup> Examples were taken from John Hejduk *Mask of Medusa*, Heinrich Klotz *Postmodern Visions and Paper Architecture*, Janet Parks *Contemporary Architectural Drawings*, and Lois E. Nesbitt *Brodsky and Utkin*.
- <sup>26</sup> The criteria was: good composition; clear spatial definition (flatness versus pictorial space/depth/field of depth); level of self-containment (piece as a whole) versus cohesion and continuity (whole as more than the sum of pieces); use of color and/or texture; line weight, size, proportion, and contrast (light and dark).
- <sup>27</sup> "If students could be taught to look at an unfamiliar building and tell you everything there was to know about the climate, economy, structure of society, and ecology of its place they might even one day learn to do the process in reverse — and become decent designers." See David Clarke. *The Architecture of Alienation*, (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1994).