

# Intervention | Installation: Idle Hands at Work Between Two Disciplines

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Slide 1. article

On February 13, 2005, this article appeared in the 'ARTS' section of the Des Moines Register. It was a review of the birth of a new gallery

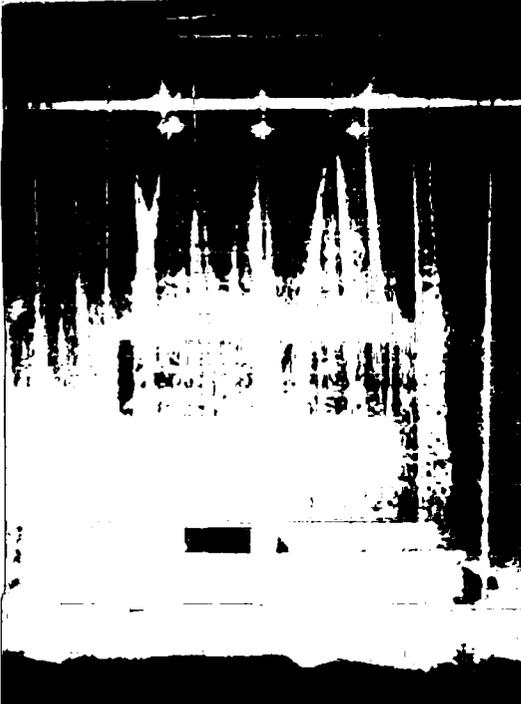
and its pilot exhibition, taking place in a part of the metro currently undergoing significant revitalization. While many of my artist friends and colleagues were put off by such a headline, I thought it interesting that the writer, Amanda Pierre, cued what seemed to be the progressive actions of members of the architectural community in the revitalization efforts of downtown. The article tells of how one local architect, Jeffrey Morgan, moved his office from the opposite end of the downtown into this burgeoning area. He and his partner Greg Schiedemann, an architect-turned-professional-photographer, had purchased the six-story Fitch Building to be occupied by both their studios, the upper floors to be rented out as studio space for area artists.

The focus of the article, however tells another related story of progressive approach, this time by younger, less financially secure members of the architectural community. Nora Wendl, Carissa Gavin, Danielle Hermann, and Catherine Hille, post-professional M.Arch degree candidates under my supervision, took an uncommon risk: They put their work and their limited finances on the line and stepped forward with a proposal for how these two new owners might utilize the empty street-level space, even in its most rough state. Pierre writes, "A group of female architecture students from Iowa State University were the first to come forward. They proposed a four-part series called "Idle hands" to exhibit their on-going work for their master's theses. Morgan and his partners, including David Llewelyn, who manages the building and partly owns the space, decided to try it as a pilot or 'test' show." She later indicates how Morgan found the responses to the exhibits and the space to be encouraging, quoting him

as saying, "I think it's what people have been looking for."

I would like to share with you some of the details of each project, as articulated by the authors themselves. I'll then conclude by summarizing what I feel to be the implications of this pedagogical path.

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Slide 2. elevation

The first project is **Clean Living (an Invent\_ory laid bare)**, by Nora Wendl

Nora writes,

A kidney specialist made famous as the one-time client and assumed jilted lover of architect Meis van der Rohe, Dr. Edith Farnsworth found the end-product of his design for a small weekend retreat-house impractical in both taste and expense. In the spring of 1953, Farnsworth took her case to home journal *House Beautiful* to gain support. Farnsworth's published complaints center around her privacy. When she did ultimately inhabit the house, Dr. Farnsworth would wake to architects and students peering in, noses pressed against the glass walls.



Slide 3. close-up of objects

Dr. Farnsworth rejected van der Rohe's idea of a feminine modernism, and the architect fought the doctor's sometimes-conservative tastes, her fierce attachment to personal belongings and her desire for the space to store and exhibit them. Eventually, the rift between client and architect was so great that it had to be settled in court, the two of them suing and counter-suing each other for years.



Slide 4. perspective

A continuing investigation of the case of the Farnsworth House, Clean-Living exhibits a collection of artifacts revealing the persona of the home's client and namesake, Dr. Edith Farnsworth, related to the conception, design, and construction of her glass house.



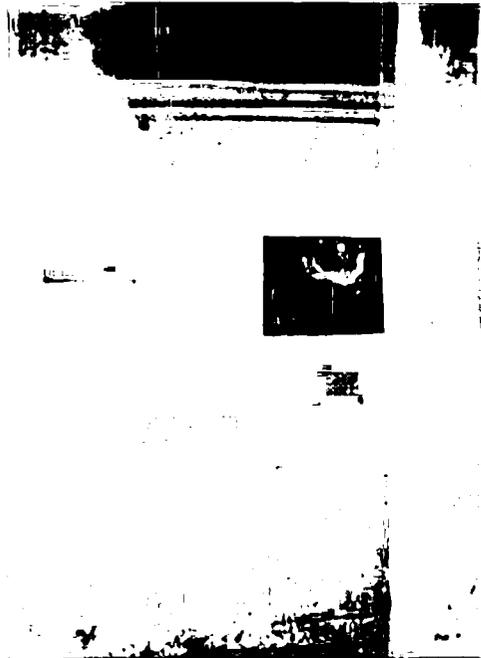
Slide 5. veiled archive

Farnsworth's connection to objects that made her feel at-home became problematic for an architect that maligned 'clutter,' and this dispute is the central focus of the exhibition.



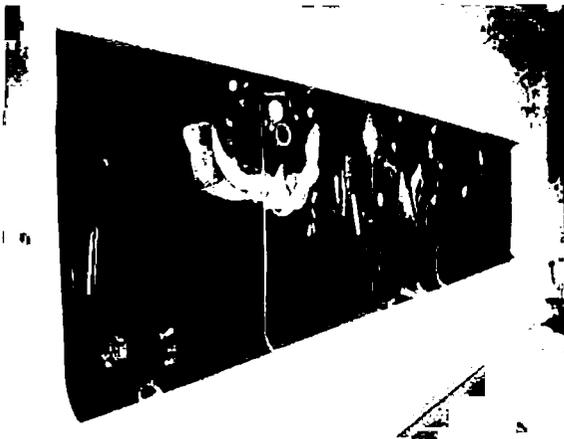
Slide 6. bursting archive

Belongings that slipped from Dr. Farnsworth's everyday life in the modern house are displayed bursting from an Archive of steel, glass, and Roman travertine. Found in unlikely places, and contributed from various personal collections, the objects are located within the Miesian Archive not because of their direct significance or value, but by the effect evoked when arranged in just such a way, with a certain proximity to one another. This method of organization pays homage to the original Farnsworth House, employing a seamlessly ordered interior. Sitting space becomes living space becomes bathroom becomes kitchen becomes bedroom...connections between elements are beinahe nichts, as Mies would say, almost nothing.



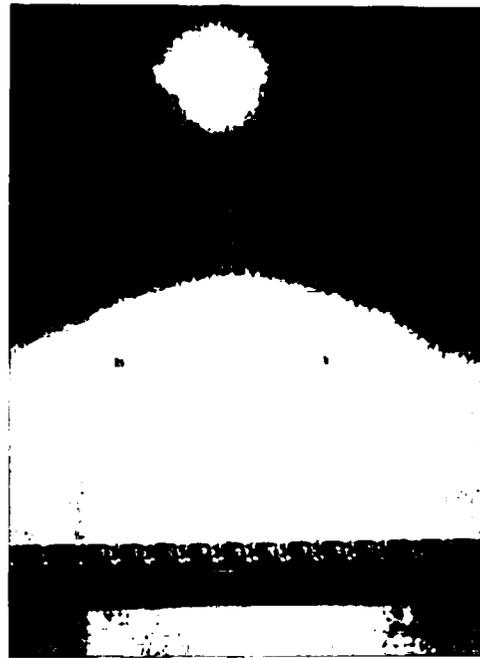
Slide 7. view beyond

Floating beyond the Archive, five drawings present an Inventory of archived objects.



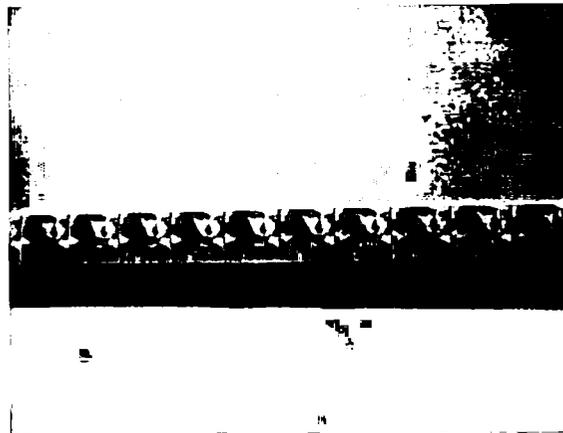
Slide 8. close-up drawings

They are re-presented against a black background, viewed as either falling into or emerging from a void. Captured with a flat-bed scanner, the images give equal importance to every surface, a true descriptive and indiscriminate approach to 'object'—making them almost hyper-real in detail and scale, just larger than life.



Slide 9. elevation 35mm slides

Dr. Farnsworth's journal entries, another driving force for this work, are represented as a series of 35mm slides called a Re:Collection. Each image re-collects a succinct memory or experience, and is discreetly exhibited in a small envelope labeled with tangible information related to her experience of the house.



Slide 10. first close-up slide

The front of each envelope is marked with an image of Dr. Farnsworth, who, envelope by envelope, is eventually obliterated by the architectural details of her house.



Slide 11. second close-up slide

Slide 12. Farnsworth + Mies

Caught up in the drama of the complex relationship between Dr. Farnsworth and Mies van der Rohe, one must be careful not to overlook important truths. Dr. Farnsworth was an outstanding client for the 1950s, but she was far from alone. A number of the most influential houses of the modern period were commissioned by other, similar progressive women in a surprising position to do so. These clients and their architects saw architecture as a medium for remaking the conventions of domestic life. Few of these client/architect relationships gained the notoriety of Edith Farnsworth's rapport with Mies van der Rohe, but all of the houses that resulted are now considered canons of the modern movement. Clean-Living is an exhibition toward revealing this uncited history, and diversifying the way we speak about, represent, and create architecture.

2



Slide 13. fabric facade

The second project is **Bad ha'Bits': on Performativity in a Renaissance Venetian Convent**, by Carissa Gavin

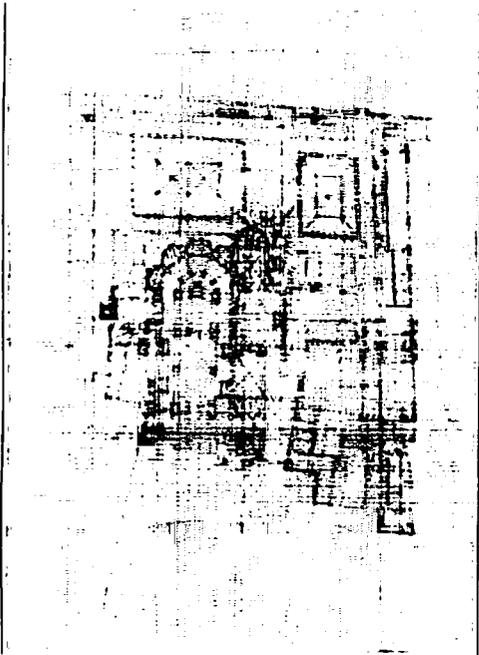
Carissa writes,

A former Renaissance Venetian convent—now turned Carabinieri headquarters—provided a fertile site of investigation for a young architectural designer/researcher, luring me back more than once to the magical city to survey and document the lived experiences of cloistered women.



Slide 14. nuns

**1614, Venice, Italy, two nuns, Suor Laura Querini and Conversa Zaccaria, were discovered to have made a breach in the wall of the complex at San Zaccaria. With the aid of an iron bar taken from a window in Querini's private cell, the two spent over a month breaking a hole in the wall of the canal side storeroom, penetrating six wythe of stone. The hole would serve as an entrance for their two lovers on two separate occasions: the first for only a one-night stay, the second a fortnight. Under trial, when the patriarch questioned Suor Querini, she spoke flagrantly about their activities, in effect testifying she had spoken vows with her mouth, not her heart. Both men were exiled from Venice while Querini and Zaccaria faced the rest of their life behind the walls of San Zaccaria, their already imposed prison.**



Slide 15. complex

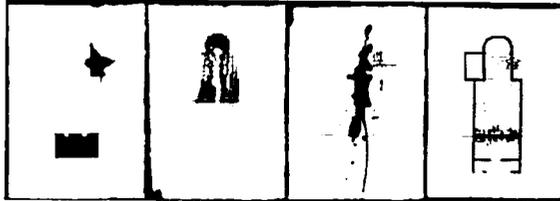
In the project *Bad ha'Bits'*, the Renaissance Venetian convent San Zaccaria is viewed a setting where activities are encoded by what we contemporarily refer to as "program." In this instance, however, nuns, not designers, provide an additional code for the spaces, taking it upon themselves to alter them to fit their subversive acts against the rites and rituals of avowed chastity. The series of documents comprising this project attempt to represent in graphic form aspects of a *program of misdemeanors* found in official proceedings of civil trials held in Venice, expressing the subversive experiences that had occurred within and upon the architecture.



Slide 16. old plans

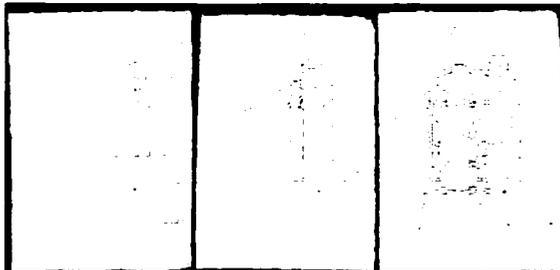
In the state archive in Venice, one finds drawings of churches that depict virtually the same composition of spaces. The one on the left, San Servolo, is considered by historians

to be the model for many of the over 50 convent churches existing in Venice during the Renaissance. The challenge was to include an experiential dimension into such drawings to help broaden what we know or should know about the architectural history of San Zaccaria. Hope being they would constitute a synthesized history in document form, one in which architecture, artifacts and cultural context are combined.



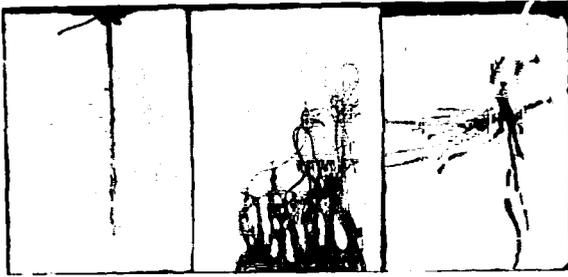
Slide 17. 4 drawings manipulated

To begin the project, this series of four drawings was created: *Ripienézza*, *Sagrestāna di Notte*, *Secrezione* and *Delitto d' Incendiario*. They are interpretations of the archived church plan of San Servolo, and serve to highlight though various graphic techniques the architectural devices and/or programmed spaces designed to carry out the program of purity for the inhabitants of the facility, yet they also highlight potential locations of disorder and misdemeanor to be compared against the San Zaccaria facility.



Slide 18. 3 drawings of san zac over 7 centuries

A second series of three drawings show the plan of San Zaccaria as it developed over seven centuries.



Slide 19. 3 drawings on fold, stitch, pocket

Choosing three critical points in time, material supplementation to the drawings allows one to begin considering the relationship between the material artifice of architecture and the subversive acts of lived experience. The interventions ultimately constitute a new programmatic vocabulary for spaces in which initially 'unplanned' acts might occur, namely... *Fold Space, Stitch Space and Pocket Space*. The interventions challenge the act and artifact of drawing in an effort to graphically describe a spatial subversion and, like the actions of the misbehaving nuns, threaten the strict document as they did the actual form. Said differently, the drawings express the lived experiences of the featured spaces, representing 'habits' both sacred and profane.



Slide 20. installation veil

In the exhibition at the Fitch Gallery, the drawings were exhibited as part of the performance/installation.



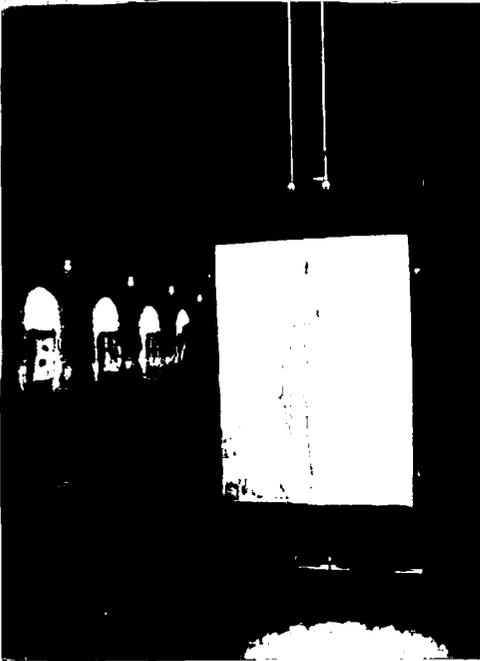
Slide 21. audience + spotlight

Here, under the watchful eye of the Sagrestána (the nun in a convent who looks after the sacristy) who has opened the sacred space of her clausura for viewing, the audience is allowed to wander freely and pay homage.



Slide 22. framed drawing

San Servolo is depicted in the aisle drawings, under dim light,



Slide 23. view of side aisle



Slide 24. candle lighting at narthex and San Zaccaria in the narthex and chancel positions, under more intense flame.



Slide 25. view of Sagrestana

While enwombed in the nave, the Sagrestána, playing the role of a living relic, performed a series of reverent poses, revealing that the expectations of avowed chastity were hard to endure for the noblewomen who were forced to live out their days behind convent walls. Yet, for the blood of the republic, many continued to utter their vows with the mouth but not the heart.

3



Slide 26. swinging woman

The third project is **BIG WOMEN: Abridging an Architectural Standard**, by Danielle Hermann

Danielle writes,

*Standards* are too often accepted as appropriate or correct and are rarely questioned, though their relationship to cultural and spatial conditions is constantly being altered. **BIG WOMEN** is an analysis of a particular set of standards created by Henry Dreyfuss, whose anthropometrical studies provide data to design professional on the measurements of the human form and its range of motion. The installation is a further exploration into a condition that the standards do not thoroughly address: a constant and rapidly changing pregnant female body.



Slide 27. close-up of viewer and drawing

The exhibit consists of a series of graphic standards modified to reflect the altered posture and shape of the pregnant female while also indicating the movement required to accommodate the constantly changing form.



Slide 28. view of small-scale march

A repetitive march of small-scale plans is the first series of illustrations. These individually

consider a particular component of the pregnant female form, highlighting the respective features to indicate the multiple facets of change that are encompassed in pregnancy. These facets range from an increased size of specific elements of the body to the physical movement or repositioning of the body in the seated position that the growth requires. The added range rectifies the deficiency of the standard.



Slide 29. view of large-scale trimester drawings

Almost giant in scale, a set of three images forms the second series. These serve as the backdrop of the exhibit. Dramatically confronting the viewer with the most prominent or evident physical changes that affect female bodies during pregnancy, these diagrams boldly announce the relevant sites of expansion. They are arranged to represent the 9-months of pregnancy divided into trimesters, serving to identify the sequential development of the body.



Slide 30. view of empty swing

An actual method of engaging the physical state that the Dreyfuss standards represent becomes an added challenge of the project. Such was once provided in earlier publications in the form of 1-1 scale posters of the standing "Joe and "Josephine" characters but now are no longer included. Here, it would have to provide a personal reference to the shifting size and posture of the pregnant female body. To accomplish this, a 1-1 scale diagram is situated at the center of the exhibit floor and raised slightly on a platform. Mediating between occupant and drawing, a swing, then hovers over the elevated image.



Slide 31. view of Danielle in swing

The swing allows an occupant to adjust and maneuver his or her own body effortlessly above the physical and spatial relationships depicted below. This offers an opportunity to interact with and understand the requirements of the pregnant body, in a context that is uninhibited by gender restrictions...



Slide 32. view of child in swing  
or, in this case, age.

Slide 33. full view of installation

BIG WOMEN was an effort to bring to the forefront an ongoing need to more closely scrutinize the standards that have become accepted too readily and questioned too rarely, as well as the implications they have on our spaces of inhabitation and our movements within them. By addressing the deficiencies inherent in these diagrams, a new perception of design standards can begin to be established. This imparts an opportunity for expanded discourse within the design profession as it adjusts to a growing female presence, and with it, the expanding female body.

4

The final project is **One thousand, nine hundred & eight spare minutes**, by Catherine Hille

This is the exact time it took this student-turned-surveyor to drive across the rural state on gravel roads and in two directions, to collect samples and locate abandoned homesteads come upon throughout her journey.



Slide 34. close-up of bags

The focus of the installation is the "Collection Bags" and, of course, the display of the sifted contents.



Slide 35. close-up of kits

The bags are the key component of the self-produced "Chronological Division Kit," and were made to attach to the rear of any vehicle.



Slide 36. view of vehicle, gravel and projected scene

Stopping to photographically record the architecture, environmental detritus kicked-up from the rear wheel and thrown by centrifugal force into the bag was retrieved, sifted once and again, to capture and the fines of a diminishing rural life.



Slide 37. close-up of boxes, fines, photographs



Slide 38. close-up of bio matter in vials



Slide 39. aerial view of full installation

The images, the three degrees of fines, and the collection bags—however mangled—were then presented in coordinated formation to construct an inhabitable map of the Midwest state within the space of the gallery. A labor of love, this meticulous and obsessive work offered an uncanny—if not puzzling—installation, tending to conflate rural infrastructure, architecture, vegetation and climate. Catherine wrote the following poem as an expression of her fondness of the rural environment:



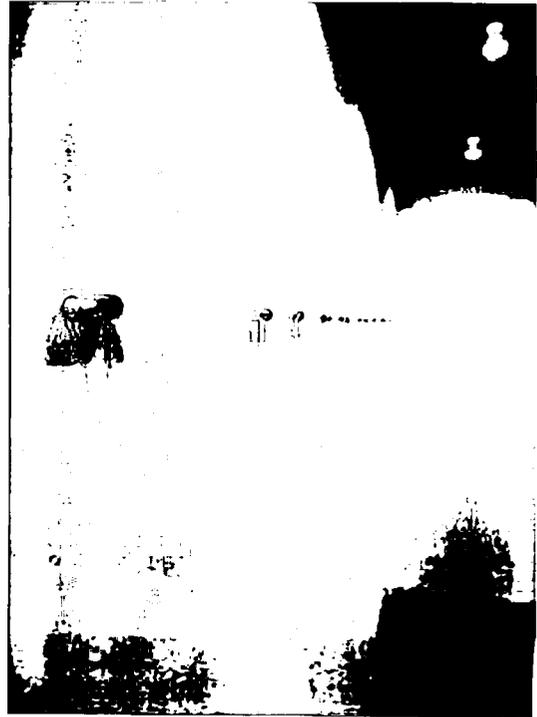
Slide 40.

Journeys into the rural environment  
 dust, mud, manure, rock, soil, insects,  
 and rain  
 abandoned structures.  
 THESE are what possess me.  
 They intrigue me, and replenish my  
 thoughts on my subject:  
 The IOWA landscape



Slide 41.

By gravel roads I move through this  
 space.  
 My car has become a collector.  
 Attached to it, as if along for the ride,  
 are intimate pieces of the environment  
 THESE have chosen to join me without  
 prejudice.  
 They tell me that the gift of my travel is  
 their permanent uprooting.



Slide 42.

In return for their loyalty  
 I've chosen not to wash them away  
 thoughtlessly.  
 I've chosen, instead, to magnify their  
 existence:  
 their origin  
 & their meaning.



Slide 43.

With the help of my Honda (Miranda), & the "Chronological Division Kit", I've reveled in this rural environment. for a duration of... "One thousand, nine hundred & eight spare minutes".



Slide 44. jeff kneeling

Her installation was a good conclusion to the series. It was one in which the topic,

both strange and familiar to the majority of its viewers, this installation proves what devilish details can be uncovered by hands otherwise considered Idle.

### SUMMARY

What is of particular interest regarding these candidates and their work, of course, is the use of the installation as a mode of intervention. In the abstract for this submission, I indicate that the point at which the applied art negotiates the fine art is a viable site on which a practice of space-making can be built. Such a practice links the tangible, elemental knowledge of the discipline of architecture to the sensorial and aesthetic effects of the site-specific art. This mode of operation has, for me, been both a practice and pedagogical tool for understanding spatial experience. Through its effective use, an audience can be brought to an awareness of the larger issues which impact architecture and the constructed environment that they inhabit.

The effort, in part, addresses the issue of advocacy for young architects in search of alternative modes of expression, and old spaces in need of renewed inhabitation. These young practitioners (all were graduates of our 5-year B.Arch program) who returned to the Post-Professional Program for clarification of their interests or for plotting a new journey for their practice are often in search of alternative sites of intervention and in how to position their work for a public audience. What emerged was a way to begin thinking about intervening within spaces whose use-value has seemingly expired (a practice I have been engaged in for a number of year, and which utilizes the installation as its primary method) and intervening within the lives of individuals who have yet to frame the "sites" of their practice. Operating at both ends of the spectrum—the new and the antiquated—the creative work, then, is a highly critical intervention in the culture of architecture, questioning what kind of architecture and architectural personnel must be maintained and valued by the discipline in light of the current cultural trend of consumption and expendability.