This is an exploration of what happens after a study visit to a building, an encounter that pulls at the root of architectural practice. Responses to time spent at Charles Moore’s Unit 9 at Sea Ranch in California provide the opportunity to draw together the various strands that constitute my personal form of hybrid practice. Writing and research enable a critical and self-reflective understanding of my trajectory through the discipline, which I enact as the director of a business and architectural practice called Agents of Change (AOC) and through my role as year leader and design unit tutor in the master’s course at the Kingston University Department of Architecture and Landscape (KSA). In this sense, a building visit is the qualification of critical theory, it is the source of experience that fuels practical production, and it gives currency to the conversation between students and tutors, brought together from diverse backgrounds and with different experiences.

The paper will explore the relationship between the practice of architecture and academic activities by analysing what each offers the other through the self-conscious experience of architecture that takes place during a building visit. The focus on lived experience reflects the architect’s core responsibility, which is the translation of culture into a form that somehow carries human experience. In my practice and in my teaching, the role of everyday objects in this process is fundamental. In his material engagement theory, Lambros Malafouris describes a world of “enactive things”: objects as containers of memory and as cognitive extensions of the human body.
A Practice-Based Perspective

Over the last decade, AOC has become increasingly involved with objects as well as with rooms, buildings, and landscapes. A recent project, called the Reading Room, involved the permanent refurbishment of a double-height gallery on the second floor of the Wellcome Collection’s headquarters in London. This accommodates a public library and museum space that blurs the distinction between gallery and academic research library and is suitable for all ages and interests. The challenge was to conceive of a spatial layout and furniture design that would encourage individual engagement with a large collection of varied content in an inclusive way. The brief was to foster communities of knowledge, meeting somewhere in between the format of the popular temporary exhibitions that the Wellcome Trust have successfully hosted in the past and the dense content of the reference library, frequented principally by academics.

Curators and architects worked fluidly around a shifting but shared sense of the collection and its value, developing an understanding of how object-based learning, archival analysis of exhibition form, and spatial trials could direct the hand of decision makers (the client’s development team and trustees), pushing the proposition away from conventional notions of museum exhibition design. A pedagogical aspect within the project related to broader discussions around person-centred learning and how hybrid spaces such as this could contribute to the quality of social learning. In simple terms, this became a careful rearticulation of the everyday nature of tables and chairs to meet, present, and work around.

The completion of the Reading Room at the Wellcome Collection in 2015 led to conversations with a wide range of potential clients interested in the way that AOC design through engagement. This process shows that the shared institutional imagination of a place can be interpreted through its objects – the collection – to the same extent as it is represented by its community, its stakeholders, the building, or its spatial context. One of the outcomes of these conversations was a commission for a design research project around dementia. Working as part of a diverse team, AOC developed a household model of care for a new care home. Our research was based on a concern for the arrangement of things, and design work was carried out using a method devised to “curate memories.”

The proposed care home was organised into households formed around eight people, with staff as equal family members. Each interior adapts to meet changing needs, creating a therapeutic environment that enables people. Each household has a generous provision of open display and closed storage; the open display in a range of areas provides opportunities to fill up the household with the stuff of life – with props, music, and life themes made available from each individual’s history.
Our fieldwork included significant periods within care home settings. It revealed standard practice in using props (media, clothes, food, tasks) to support activity and to encourage reminiscence. Some props were borrowed and bartered by staff over time to produce what we called a “constructed domestic” that suited the residents’ alternate realities. More significantly, each family member is encouraged to bring furniture and fittings with them when they move into a home, and a story of each resident’s life is developed and shared day to day in a memory box located at the threshold to each private bedroom.

In existing care homes, families often help their loved one settle in and become situated. And the range of spaces created in typical private rooms is truly remarkable: white cube galleries for a model car display; rooms layered and filled with the best china, a library, and family portraits; even contrived facsimiles of entire flat layouts condensed to replicate the previous trip from home to the day-care centre across the road. In making smaller integrated households, it became harder to facilitate the autonomous moments described, so the question from the work became how to establish the right responsive encouraging aesthetic that could make individual lifeworlds (all the immediate experiences, activities, and contacts that make up the world of an individual or corporate life) redolent in the same household. Our intention was to develop an aesthetic of architecture that would support these acquired everyday collections with ease. A successful architectural solution would put things in all the right places to make suggestive and enactive situations and to enable the performance of dementia care (a stage set to support players and requiring direction). It would be generous in deployment to trigger an expanded imagination of thought, where memories are accessed through engagement with physical things.

The Interrelationship of Things

In 2019–2020, the unit I run at KSA explored the concept of “Our Health,” enacted through a professional collaboration set up by AOC with Pembroke House, a settlement located in Walworth, Southwark. Our project was based in The Walworth Living Room, an experimental space set up by the settlement to examine social prescription and community health (or well-being) in a semi-derelict Victorian church hall. Students joined a weekly residency gaining hands-on experience of live design while helping to run a community social prescription service. The eight-week period provided a unique context for students to test and develop ideas around managing objects in space. This experience in the field was supported by a field trip visiting the built work of Charles Moore, focusing on his collaborative process as a way to consider community co-design in a more global context.
The design unit subscribes to the concept of “thinking through making,” which considers the production of drawings, models, and eventually buildings, for example, as situated acts that gain affordance through the previous lived experience of buildings. This consideration lies at the heart of decision-making in both my professional practice and my teaching. At the school of architecture, the evaluation of iterative work is often carried out through conversation, either in a formal review or an informal tutorial. This conversational “to and thro” reflective process fosters the development of personal judgement, which itself grows through the self-conscious experience of architecture. The thinking works beyond object or building consideration to “place-making” and at all scales of work is overtly active rather than abstract or purely formal. As a design process, it considers material as an enactive sign and includes the everyday as relevant in contributing to perception or transformative cognition – the content within can be equivalent to geometry and light in a survey of space. The approach requires careful observation, addressed in teaching through a material survey – a tool developed similarly in architecture and archaeology, used to both capture the past and predict the future use of material.

In February 2020, I took my students to visit Condominium One in Sea Ranch, a place important for me as a pedagogic, historical, and creative subject. Sea Ranch was designed by Moore, Lyndon, Turnbull, and Whitaker and completed in 1966. Charles Moore kept a home in Unit 9 there until his death in 1993, and it remains a tantalising record of the architect’s imagination not only writ large but expanded and reiterated as a lived everyday reality. The home adapted to Moore’s shifting needs and persuasions and became filled with objects gleaned through his life and travels. As such, Unit 9 is ripe for exploration as a pedagogic and creative subject for analysis of “contented space.” Moore, who was also an architect and an educator, helped instigate a still popular architectural idea, where the “poetic image” of an architecture “as found,” in other words its phenomenological effect on the individual, is considered more important than its location in history. Unit 9 remains much as it was when Moore died in 1993, filled with his objects, and in this state is available for holiday let; taking advantage of this, we spent three days living there. This strange situation is augmented by the existence of archival material on the space, from the design process to media coverage, to photographs taken over the years of its occupation. Among these papers, Moore’s own words on well-being can be found:

Inhabiting [...] is a basic human endeavor, not far behind eating and sleeping, though to my mind far less universally achieved. While touted theoretical or linguistic abstractions have been the basis for some architects’ houses, I’ve tended toward the idea that a house can be a stage where the inhabitant can act out his or her life [...] For me it has involved establishing as potently as I could manage a sanctuary not only for me but for
my possessions, trying to evoke the feeling of well-being that Indonesian dancers call being centered.\textsuperscript{10}

\section*{Working Forwards and Backwards}

I was first introduced Sea Ranch Condominium One during my undergraduate studies, and visual memories from it have remained with me ever since, so the opportunity to visit Unit 9 was the personal realisation of a twenty-odd-year desire. These lasting impressions include the different scales of the building, from its silhouette as a diminutive “wooden rock”\textsuperscript{11} fitting into the Californian coastal landscape, its somehow diaphanous facade with careful apertures, the layers of space internally making houses within houses, and finally, the collections of knick-knacks revealed in the images shown as orchestrated cones of vision. Harry Mallgrave highlights various studies suggesting that the processes of remembering the past and imagining the future share a common brain network centred in the hippocampus.\textsuperscript{12} This area of the brain is crucial in “scene construction theory,” used not only in creating memories but also in the imagination and projection of the future, which is essential to the act of design.

In contrast, the design studio activities carried out in the Walworth Living Room became the practice of an architecture with immediate feedback. For example, a 09:00 meeting with project stakeholders – a dancer, a service designer, a project manager – would involve discussion of student-led changes to the spatial layout. By 11:00, the space would be reorganised, and locals would start to arrive. Such a day would be dominated by lunch and the tea for children after school, which was, for many, their best access to either conversation or good food that day. By 16:00, after a day of joining in, each student would have an observed understanding of how the space had been used and what had worked better for whom, ready for the next week. In our time in the Walworth Living Room, we came to understand the significantly varied social outcomes possible through the weekly rearrangement of things within a fixed architectural formal space.

In advance and following our field trip to California, this process was reversed – we wanted to unpick the evolution of the architecture as found through historical drawings and photos to understand the relationship between architectural form and its content. The same presentation drawings are used in most publications – the Rizzoli-published monograph on Moore\textsuperscript{13} reviewed on-site revealed that the Unit 9 plan and internal elevations deviate significantly from the readily available published book record – the drawings perhaps drawn for presentation prior to completion. A famous internal perspective\textsuperscript{14} reveals the volumetric concept, its spatial invitation, and its capacity to hold domestic fixtures and fittings, which can be understood as a presentation drawing.
developed in design as a promise of the space to come. Unit 9 as experienced became the corollary of that: an opportunity embellished by the life and times of Moore. Reference to the online archives suggests that final site decisions may well have significantly affected the character of the space – and as one of ten similar but different units, Unit 9 is not specifically represented in the final representations. The fieldwork research we undertook suggests that Unit 9 as built is not part of the drawn record – in publications or readily accessible archive records.

Across a history of photography, the accretion and movement of objects across the space can be traced. The mirror, moose head, and lighthouse model have remained in place a long time, but the Indian fabric paintings, the wall-hung Spanish ceiling stuffed with prancing horses and abalone, and the goat sculpture all are later additions. These change the atmosphere of the space, along with the refreshment of upholstery and painted supergraphics.

Our Lived Experience

And everywhere are shelves jammed with books and objects – awash with objects – and that is its most notable characteristic. All of these things, souvenirs of places I have visited, miniature cities and scenes with staggering leaps of scale, all of these things contribute by default to the ornament of my house.

We arrived late in the day after the drive from Santa Cruz and pizza in Gualala and left early on the fourth day for San Francisco. We lived in Unit 9 for around sixty hours. This occupancy served as a study of the form of things; it was an attempt to register the building through everyday and architectural acts, like getting up, eating, going to bed, socialising, and reading, but also through making a survey, which involved walking the surroundings (fig. 9.1) – Black Point, the beach, the coastline up to the Meadow (all important spaces in the Lawerence Halprin led master plan and design process) – and conversations with Donlyn Lyndon and Maynard Lyndon. Of those sixty hours, 30 per cent of my time was spent in slumber, 20 per cent was spent on excursions around Sea Ranch, and 25 per cent was spent surveying the Condominium One and its vicinity – 80 per cent of that survey time was spent inside Unit 9.

More revealing were the cycles of activity. We rose early to watch the sun emerge and light up the home; we went walking south-east in the morning, north-west in the afternoon; and we experienced a cool blue morning was followed by a bright orange sunset in the “saddlebag” bay window – mornings in, afternoons out. Throughout, the bed tent glowed with either the sun or electric light. That first morning after getting our bearings, we surveyed Unit 9, revealing its simple manufacture. We undertook a number of photo surveys of
the space that mapped the changing illumination. My own photo survey captured seventy-nine object groupings, including Moore’s own drawing board in the cleaning cupboard. While being a mix of things, with recent additions, a majority can be seen somewhere in the historic picture archive. More than half the objects are either representations of animals or architecture. Half the objects are arranged on or in furniture, while an additional quarter were hung on that internal structural frame. Around one third of the objects adorn the double-height space of the main living area and the bay window (fig. 9.2).

Fig. 9.1  An afternoon walk across Black Point © Tom Coward.

Fig. 9.2  Annotated survey plans measured in situ show the locations of objects on open display during the visit. © Tom Coward.
Inventory and Its Relationship to Material Engagement Theory

The collective survey process made with the students became a resource for my own reflections. The first step was to construct as built drawings of the space in plan section and elevation. The photos were used to determine the timetable of actions and the object list. Next, the plans were used to plot the object list. Then, returning to the internal design perspective of Unit 1 as a guide, I constructed an object model of the actual location of objects as they were found in Unit 9. The aim was to recreate that propositional perspective through a reverse process; the auditing of the collection, decor, fixtures, and fittings revealed dialogues in material space and an approach to revealing participation within everyday collections (fig. 9.3).

This pedagogical and personal experience raised questions pertinent to my own design practice, around the purposes of visiting and surveying a building for study, gathering immediate spatial information but also perhaps considering deeper content, searching for a continuance of architectural culture through the material of the buildings themselves. If we explore buildings to perceive our shared culture of architecture – then our musings are not far from a socio-cultural anthropology.
Archaeological illustration can be described in discrete parts: surveying to produce accurate records of sites through plan, section, elevations, and axonometric projections; artefact illustration to record objects using agreed conventions to allow further study; and interpretive reconstruction illustration visualising the results of fieldwork in a way that is meaningful and visually appealing to as many people as possible. These aims and means resonate with the architectural practitioner; they are the tools of the trade in describing design work for various audiences throughout the process of conspiring a future building. The role of drawings then, from scratchy fieldwork notes to glossy visualisations or even photographs is to put out feelers speculatively into both our past and into our future and to evidence a cultured position into the material world of things.

The premise of material engagement theory, mentioned at the beginning of this discussion in referring to “enactive things,” helps draw together different threads of my personal hybrid practice. Enactive signification as a dynamic between material and mind makes sense to architects – it is the imagination within the recombination of the “poetic image,” but it also leads to positive qualities being maintained within physical standards (material, technological, and geometric). In Moore’s Unit 9, the syncopation between envelope aperture and the structural figure does much to determine its architectural, that is geometric and material, appeal. But this was also the mechanism in which Moore constructed his lived cognitive centring: it determined the potential for deployment of things within the space. There is a clear distance between the project at conception, in its making, and in its current reality. Moore’s “centring” evolved to maintain a spatial image of his own thinking – the orchestration of things in space and light to construct his view of the world – a spatial reinforcement of a good feeling.

The material engagement theory as an explanatory path is based on three interrelated working hypotheses: first, the extended mind is a condition in which cognition is intertwined with material culture; second, enactive signification is a dynamic interaction between material and mind enacting and bringing forth the world; and third, material agency, which is not generated just from the mind, is a product of situated activity. This approach facilitates an understanding of the significance of contingencies in our thinking, of situated action, where all action is a product of the context in which it is taken, and affordance, being what the environment offers the individual.

The provocation is that designers can only design by thinking through their lived experiences, or, in other words, that design is a cultured form of mirroring. The correct analysis of any architectural precedent, on paper or even better in tangible reality, is arguably one of assimilation, and the actions one goes through in occupying any architecture are the primary way to understand its worth. I finish with the words of Tim Ingold, who suggests reversing the architect’s “building perspective,” or plan for occupation, by considering the
“dwelling perspective,” allowing us to think of the house as something that arises “within the life process itself [...] the forms people make or build [...] arise within the current of their involved activity, in the specific relational contexts of their practical engagement with their surroundings.” To spend any period of time in Unit 9 might give a sense of this dwelling perspective – and remind one of the spatial primacy vital within architectural education, the development of practice, and in criticism – to ensure that you are experienced in the experience of architecture or its “situatedness,” and that buildings last a very long time beyond their original ideation to become only better – and better to inspire others.
Notes

2. The Wellcome Trust runs the Wellcome Collection, a public venue based in a 1930s neoclassical building at 183 Euston Road, London.
8. Content can be defined as everything that is included in a collection and that is held or included in something. Contentedness can be considered as the state of being contented with your situation in life. I am interested in the combination here – everything that is included in a collection to be content with your situation.
18. Donlyn Lyndon is one of the four principal architects making up MLTW, architect of the scheme. Both he and his brother Maynard were involved in the construction of the project and currently live at Sea Ranch.


Bibliography


