7. Dwelling in the twenty-first century: 'The Professor's Study'

Neil Spiller

It is perhaps obvious to many that to dwell is much more than to live – to survive. To dwell is to populate the world – to build our world by operating within it, and those constructions, whether actions, events, situations, poems, pictures or buildings leave mnemonic traces within minds and spaces. Rooms and brains are witnesses to individual pasts. The room is a memory theatre that the agile and synchronised mind can read. The room's objects provoke memories, aspirations, failures, loves, loves lost and so much more. A lifetime of existence can be recorded in a single room or house, for example John Soane's House in London. So, rooms are mnemonic. This of course is not a new idea. Frances Yates in her seminal book *The Art of Memory* traces such ideas back to Roman times via Cicero, Ramon Lull, Giordano Bruno and many others. Indeed, *The Art of Memory* brilliantly describes the enigmatic *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* 1499[1] which portrays a surreal landscape, traversed by a just-awoken lovelorn Poliphilo that is laden with pageants, architectural edifices, strange sculptures and pert nymphs as:

> Perhaps an artificial memory gone out of control into wild imaginative indulgence . . . [it] makes one wonder whether the mysterious inscriptions so characteristic of this work may owe something to the influence of visual alphabets and memory images, whether, that is to say, the dream archaeology of the human mingles with the dream memory systems to form a strange fantasia.[2]

Whilst Yates's book failed to make a full connection to the present day, it did reference the, at the time, primeval development of the computer. The *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* is a great work of surrealism. The

surrealists had studied the arcane, hermetic arts and were familiar with the memory theatres and their advanced use of syntax, semiotics and symbolism – primary among those surrealists who used mnemonic devices to animate their work were Max Ernst, Salvador Dali and Leonora Carrington. The memory theatres are also implicitly tied up with the alchemic arts and the secret languages (both graphic and spatial) of the alchemic adepts. Mnemonic forms are symbiotic with their context and the viewer simultaneously. Marcel Duchamp understood the mnemonic imperative and the act of viewing, the desiring gaze and the knots of association of objects and forms implicitly. Duchamp's work resonates with associative geometries, reflexive conditions, shape-shifting and semiotic extravagances.

But let's go back to another beginning. During 1998, I started to create an architectural theoretical project that set itself the following brief: with a combination of virtual, cyberspace and real-world architectural notions, is it possible to embroider space so that activities elsewhere, at whatever scale, can condition the formation and growth of an architecture? Such an idea is capable of producing a sublime space that grows and decays, changes and rearranges, that speaks of human beings as actors in a series of linear, non-linear and quantum events. Small expansions, minute stresses and strains, both virtual and actual, can all be utilised. This project I have called 'Communicating Vessels', and after essentially 12 years, it is ongoing, currently consisting of approximately 250 drawings and thousands of words of text, poetry and prose. It has many interlinked parts, all somehow related reflexively, all flirting with the choreography of chance and all rejoicing in surrealist protocols of space making and symbolism. Like the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, this is an unfamiliar terrain, and like Duchamp's large glass, it is activated by desire. This creates the illusive 'holy gasoline' that is the 'fuel' of the ever-shifting system – a cybernetic system.

Many Dadaist and surrealist personalities appear fleetingly in the 'vessels', and these include Dali, Duchamp, Hugo Ball and the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. But the project is most in debt to Alfred Jarry and his poetic conceit of 'Pataphysics with its three declensions of anomaly, hybridity and clinamen – the swerve. The project is often autobiographical, and the otherworldly island that most of 'Communicating Vessels' is situated on is run by a strange professor. One of the set pieces in the project is 'The Professor's Study', and it pursues notions of dwelling, mnemonics, virtual/actual parallax and memory theatres. Like all the pieces of the 'Communicating Vessels', the study is inspired by, and
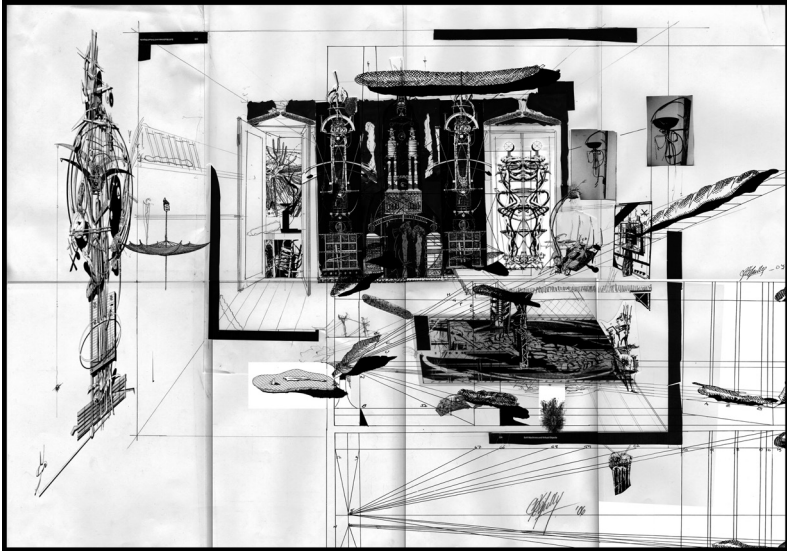
7.1 Neil Spiller, 'Professor's Study', 2006. Digital collage. Drawing shows front end of the study with augmented reality projections from Neil Spiller's ongoing 'Communicating Vessels Project', 1998–present. © Neil Spiller.
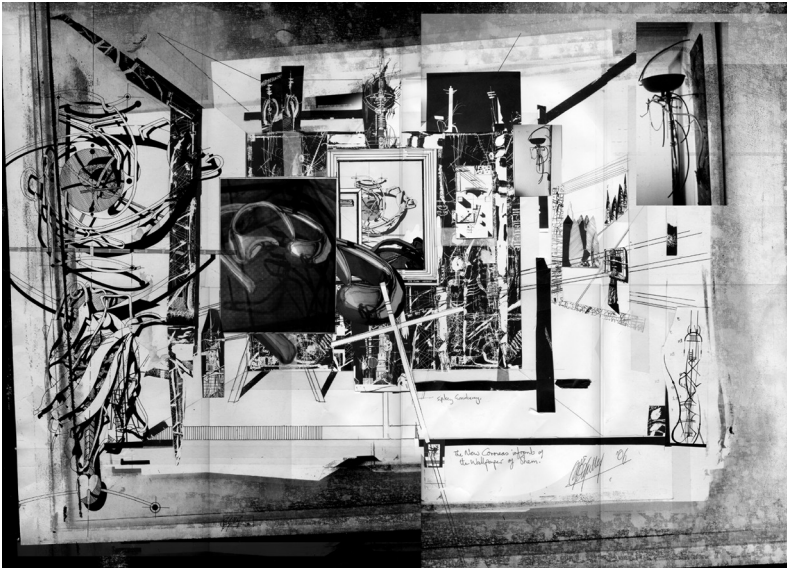
7.2 Neil Spiller, 'Professor's Study', 2006. Digital collage. Drawing shows back end of the study with wallpaper that depicts Shem from Neil Spiller's ongoing 'Communicating Vessels Project', 1998–present. © Neil Spiller.

rubs up against, ideas of art history and architectural space and myth making. There are five key references to 'The Professor's Study', and these are detailed below.

The first reference is Carpaccio's (c.1455–1525) early sixteenth-century painting 'Saint Augustine in his Study'. The saint is surrounded by a series of mnemonic forms. 'The Professor's Study' is a jumble of prototypes, ideas and iconic forms from his own history; he designed it all.

The second reference is Dali's painting, inspired by Velazquez's 'Las Meninas', 'Dali from the Back Painting Gala from the Back Externalised by Six Virtual Corneas Provisionally Reflected in Six Real Mirrors' (1972–3).

However, initially, the idea of 'The Professor's Study' was provoked by Cornelius Meyer's 'Dwelling for a Gentleman' of 1689. The etchings show four elevations that are richly different and contain all that a gentleman could possibly need in the seventeenth century. Such fixtures and fittings include a barber's tray, a kennel for a dog, cupboards for curios and a long winding clock (a year) with a lantern for night viewing, sun clock, wine cellar and press.

Another influence on the project is an edition of the art magazine *View*: 'The Marcel Duchamp Special Issue' from 1945 and particularly Frederick Kiesler's 'Les Larves d'Imagie d'Henri Robert Marcel Duchamp' triptych. Whilst much can be and has been said of Kiesler's and Duchamp's intellectual relationship, their friendship and their paths both within and outside surrealism, this triptych resonates with many of the ideas discussed in this article – those of mnemonics, reflexivity and schizoid semiotic objects and the second-order cybernetic notion of one building one's world whilst acting within it. So, Duchamp's environment in these photographs is indicative of his art, his cognitive map and his rarefied epistemologies of space, of gender, or multidimensions, desire and the view.

'The Professor's Study' is another interpretation of these notions and asserts a belief in the following: (1) creative people represent their life-learned epistemologies time and time again in their work; and (2) they dwell in these epistemologies, they are them, and them are they. Objects can transmute, creating families of semiotic association. For example, the anemone-headed clinamen in my work stands in for the painting machine in Jarry's *Dr Faustroll*, Duchamp's vibrating masculine malic moulds in the large glass and Tingely's metamatic drawing machines.

James Joyce also understands the room as a witness, chunking engine of memory and the centre of dwelling. He is the final reference in the study. Here, he describes the House of O'Shea in *Finnegans Wake*:

The warped flooring of the lair and soundconducting walls thereof, to say nothing of the uprights and imposts, were persianly literatured with burst love letters, telltale stories, stickyback snaps, doubtful eggshells [. . .] upset latten tintacks, unused mill and stumbling stones, twisted quills, painful digests, magnifying wineglasses, solid objects cast as goblins, once current puns, quashed quotatoes, messes of motage, unquestionable issue papers, seedy ejaculations, limerick damns, crocodile tears, spilt ink, blasphematory spits, young ladies' milkmaids . . . [3]

Indeed, at the Dali-inspired end of the study is the professor's wallpaper of Shem, consisting of some of the professor's homely essences of fountainly battles, sceptic plans, scarlet crosses, balls of intellectual fluff, mental chewing gum, bridesmaids trains, drill alters, plump black lines, light in the black, Nelson watchers, Pinter Splinters, optimistic commissions, disappointment, drop cutting acridity and phlegm.

William Anastasi's reading on *Finnegans Wake* sees Alfred Jarry as an important character in Joyce's masterpiece. Joyce refers to Jarry as 'me altar's ego in miniature'[4] and retells or recalls many scenes from Jarry's life, as well as every novel and major character of Jarry's. In addition, one of the main characters is Shem, aka Jerry (Jarry), 'Me innerman monophone'.[5]

Indeed, the study is intended to describe the Professor's 'Innerman monophone' – for that is all we have.

Notes

1 Francesco Colonna, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* [1499], trans. Joseph Goodwin (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999).
2 Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1966), 123.
3 James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (Los Angeles: Greenlight Books, 2012), 132.
4 Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, 314.
5 Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, 313.

Bibliography

Colonna, Francesco. *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*. Translated by Joseph Goodwin. London: Thames and Hudson, 1999.

Joyce, James. *Finnegans Wake.* Los Angeles: Greenlight Books, 2012.

Yates, Frances. *The Art of Memory.* Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1966.