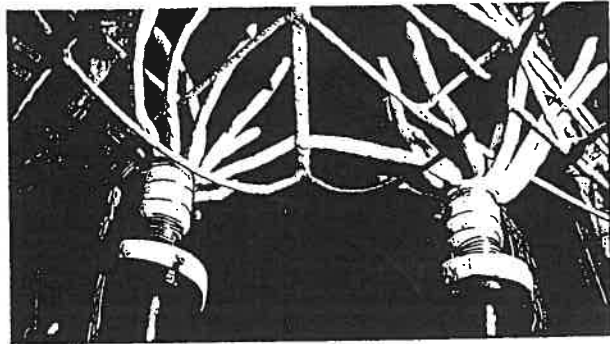


SUPPLEMENTING THE SITES OF PRACTICE

In this year's RIBA Annual Discourse, Jennifer Bloomer described her allegorical approach to architecture in the context of a collaborative project in Chicago. We publish an abridged version below

Right, *Tables of Bower*, project for Chicago Institute of Architecture and Urbanism, 1990-1, detail



JENNIFER BLOOMER

Consider how the naming of a thing is a kind of enclosure when we classify it, we pin it down. The naming of things and qualities and actions is a very orderly system of apprehending the world. It allows us to communicate with each other, which is a very good thing. But what is interesting about the enclosure that is naming and classifying is the fact of the delineation of an inside and an outside, a this and not that. That animal (not plant) is a dog (not a cat). Things become distinct from each other, so that there is no muddying, no simultaneity. A thing that is both a dog and a cat, we would call a monster, and things that are monstrous belong to the category of 'improper'. It is a tidy system encompassing a tidy world.

There is today in the discipline of architecture a strong naming, or enclosing, impulse that can be characterized succinctly by two words: 'practice' and 'theory'. The tidy people who populate the discipline are known as practitioners and theoreticians. The practitioner designs buildings; the theoretician does not. The theoretician writes; the practitioner does not. The practitioner,

it is said, has no need of talking or writing about his or her buildings; they speak for themselves. In this scenario, the practice of the theoretician is already a minor and supplemental one, and is contained within a carefully delineated site. What happens when the theoretician moves from making constructions with words to making theory with tangible materials? We might call this move an engendering of supplemental sites of practice.

The proper and the personal

The words, proper, property, and propriety come to us from the Latin word proprius, meaning 'one's own', 'special', 'particular'. The adverb, proprie, means 'exclusively for oneself'. The proper name is the founding condition of that which is proper. The removal of a slave's or wife's proper name and the substitution of another proper name, or the giving of one's proper name to one's child, is an act of marking that person as one's own, or exclusively for oneself.

The proper is the emblematic mantra of our society. By means of an anagram game, we can reveal what is hidden in the proper: pop, pope, rope, prop, and

ero (I will). But there is also a pore.

In an essay in which she uses structural failure in architecture as a trope for the failure of the world of the proper to shelter properly the 'babbling King' in *King Lear*, then reverses the direction of the trope to speak to architecture, Catherine Ingraham points to this hole, this beginning of fissure, of fault:

*Lear's exposure of a certain relation of the proper ... to property ... reveals a new territory that ... gives the dangerous illusion of shelter but 'lets the weather in'. Under this leaky roof ... are built the mythical structures that we call kingdoms, cities, homes, or, more philosophically, the structures of the proper: the proper name, self-consciousness that is at home with itself. When the fault lines that break up shelter are revealed, ... not as exceptional fissures ... but as part of the ordinary and everyday banalities of house and home, then, to put it mildly, all hell breaks loose. One might say that architecture comes into its own the moment the structure of the proper is destabilized. For it is at this moment that the real ground is broken and form is given.*¹

I love these passages for the optimism they express about the possibilities of architecture; they soothe a despair that I have from time to time over my profession and its positioning in the culture as a kind of handmaiden to corporate capitalism.

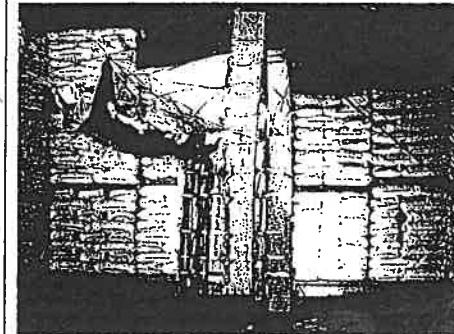
And now, a supplemental site has been marked. It is the place where the proper, or the professional, and the personal come together: where the local, the ordinary, the everyday, the complex subjectivities that we are, coincide with the traditional and heroic, but cool, distant, and rational moves of the architect.

Allegory and architecture

The mode of allegory re-marks this site. As you know, an allegory is a representation that has overt and covert content, with the overt or superficial representation paralleling or giving clues to the reading of the underlying content. Its etymology, allos - other, agoreuein - speaks in public, in the agora, denotes its fundamental supplementarity as well as its connection to urban space. Traditionally, the power of allegory has lain in what is

signified by its surface: the task of reading traditional allegories is one of uncovering deeply hidden meanings, a task of 'interpreting the allegorist's intention'. In the twentieth century, allegory has taken a significant turn, precipitated by the work of Walter Benjamin.² In this so-called 'narrative allegory', it is the material of the signifiers - words and/or images - themselves and their generative, or inventive, possibilities that is foregrounded. In narrative allegory, the patterns of ink on the page, the joints

of symbolic materiality and its ties to traditional allegory, it seems important not to abandon the one for the other. When narrative allegory is taken as a supplemental practice to the already allegorical nature of architecture, the field of possibilities for architecture as a system of cultural representation unfolds, as a mantle of intricately assembled minutiae, at a dazzling scale. And, for me, one of the most exciting prospects is the way in which a consideration of the constructions that can be generated from a



Left, *Tables of Bower* project, full-scale construction and detail

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consideration of the allegorical potential of architectural material itself opens up the range of what constitutes architectural material and how we can manipulate it.

Such an exploration necessitates a focus on the small, the detail. The question, 'What does it mean?' becomes diminished, and the question 'How does it work?' is the condition for making, and for reading, the object.³ (In other words, the importance of the architectural 'concept' as we call it, fades beneath a panoply of multiple relationships of parts. It is how it works that is what it means.) Major architecture is supplemented by minor architecture.

Minor architecture

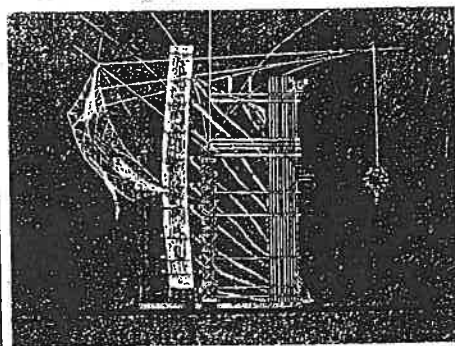
For several years now, I have been wondering about something I have called Minor Architecture. This concept is both properly deduced from Manfredo Tafuri's concept of 'major architecture' and illegitimately appropriated from Gilles Deleuze's and Felix Guattari's concept of minor literature. Minor literature is writing that takes on the conventions of a major language and subverts it from the inside. The subject

Minor
architecture is
a proposal for
a revolutionary
architectural
criticism

of Deleuze and Guattari is the work of Franz Kafka, a Jew writing in German in Prague in the early part of this century. Minor literature possesses three dominant characteristics: it is that which a minority constructs within a major language, involving a deterritorialization of that language – Deleuze and Guattari compare Prague German to American Black English; it is an intensely political literature in which the distinction between the personal and the political dissolves; minor literatures are collective assemblages – everything in them takes on a collective value.

Deleuze and Guattari describe two paths of deterritorialization. One is 'artificially [to] enrich [the language], to swell it up through all the resources of symbolism, of oneirism, of esoteric sense, of a hidden signifier'. This is a Joycean approach. The other is to take on the poverty of a language and take it further, 'to the point of sobriety'.⁴ This is Kafka's approach. Deleuze and Guattari then reject the Joycean as a kind of closet reterritorialization that breaks from the people, and go all the way with Kafka.

In transferring such a concept to



Above, *Tables of Bower project, Dirty Drawing:* elevation; metallic inks and watercolour on mulberry paper. Object: dory hull, maple, steel, concrete, cow skin, wire, mammoth bones and other terrestrial detritus. Far right, detail of construction

architecture, already much more intensely materially simple and with more complex relationships to 'the people' and to pragmatics, I believe it necessary to hang on to both possibilities, shuttling between them.

What a minor architecture could be is a collection of practices that follow these conditions. One of the tasks of a minor architecture is to operate critically upon the dominance of the visual – the image – as a mode of perceiving and understanding architecture. Thus, what a minor architecture looks like is

irrelevant outside the condition of its 'looking like' architecture. Minor architecture is not, therefore, a proposal for a style or an *architecture parlante*, but for a revolutionary architectural criticism, a 'criticism from within' that goes deeply into the conventions of architecture's collusion with mechanisms of power.

The project that I am going to show you is more a mapping of a minor practice than an example of minor architecture. It is the product of a supplemental practice, the practice of theory. It is about generative possibilities for practice.

Mapping a minor architecture

This collaborative urban design project for the city of Chicago was begun under support from a fellowship granted to me by the Chicago Institute for Architecture and Urbanism in 1989-90, and has been in progress since. The collaboration has been a long and wide one, involving many students and friends, including, most notably, Nina Hofer, Mikesch Muecke, Jimmie Harrison, and Bob Heilman. It began with a wondering about corners. The corner has been a site of architectural ruminations and reckonings for a long time; it is the present condition of Cartesian space. Corners are where we put important executives' offices and the best hotel rooms in our building plans; but corners are also where we had to sit when we were bad children. And in Chicago, the corner is the site of architectural attention and detail – turrets, grotesque paired sculptures and large projecting clocks, all kinds of operations upon the right angle, and its turbulent pairings with the wind.

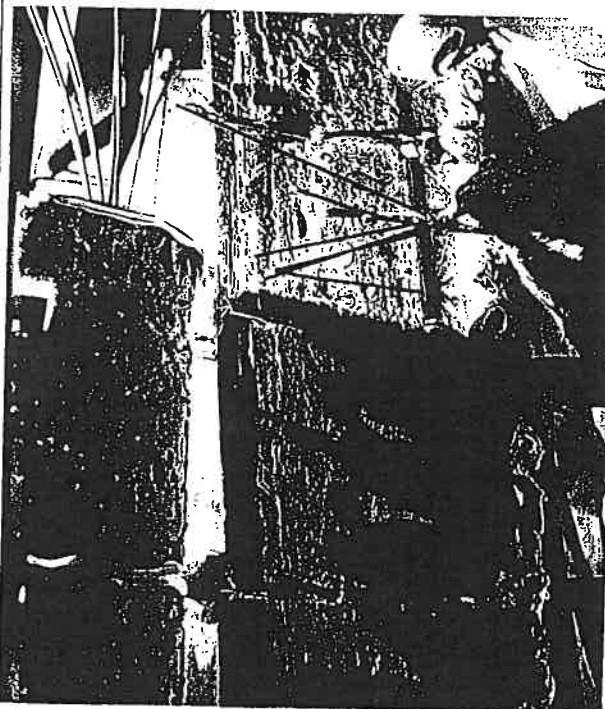
The word corner, of course, calls for projections and the grotesque; through its root, *ker*, signifying horn, it is related to the words carrot, rhinoceros, and cerebellum. The corner is also a part of the metaphor that we use to signify a feeling of powerlessness to act: we have been backed into a corner or, we have painted ourselves into a corner. Building in or on the corner is an act of resistance within this metaphor; when we are in the corner, there is an important possibility of action left to us – to build in or through or on the corner.

Our project consists of a constellation of corner barnacle structures that

explore the structure/ornament pair in significant areas. First, they are constituted as parasitical and habitable. They are, therefore, by conventional definition both ornamental – they are added to existing, complete structures – and structural – they are complete, occupiable constructions on their own. They are supplemental: they are excessive to the proper architectural domain of the city and they sign a particular constellation of lack in that domain. They exist in a territory of blurred boundaries. Furthermore, they are constituted as

the presence of alterity to the status quo. They possess an irritating and troubling attraction; they are fascinating and horrible.

The constructions were generated from an allegorical nexus plotted as the revenge of Louis Sullivan, many of whose highly ornamented buildings in Chicago and elsewhere have been torn down to provide sites for taller, sleeker, urban structures. Sullivan was the 'Dean of American architects', yet he came to the end of his life lonely and poverty stricken, with the bulk of his



structures of significance; as fetishes, they foreground a structure of anxiety that they ostensibly cover or soothe. They serve as possible places for human beings who might otherwise be on the street to rest and be out of the wind and rain – they are 'housing for the homeless'; but in their sitings and their aesthetic vagary, they proclaim their lack, their failure to 'solve the problem', and they serve as reminders writ large of the condition of rampant homelessness in the city. At both the material and the iconographic levels, they signify

lovingly laboured drawings, as the story goes, thrown out into the street. Both elevated and degraded, Sullivan serves here as a trope of alterity. Furthermore, he and Freud's 'Dora', both of whose 'unconscious' homosexual tendencies were treated – Dora's by Freud, Sullivan's by a herd of architectural historians, become tropes for each other.

This identification of this giant of American architecture with a woman is not an arbitrary caprice, but an appropriation from the annals of architectural

history. In Larry Millett's *The Curve of the Arch*, Sullivan is described as 'intransigent' and 'temperamental', 'moody and morose'. He is described as handsome, a dandy, a person who cared too much about his appearance, about clothing and fabrics: 'He also took considerable pride in his appearance. Always immaculately groomed, with never a hair out of place, he was, in a word, vain about his looks.'⁶

In those passages from historians who properly omit reference to Sullivan's sexuality, he is described in feminine stereotype. He is made out to be 'like a woman'. Even Robert Twombly's 1986 biography of Sullivan, which in a final chapter makes the case for Sullivan's 'homosexuality, if indeed that is what it was', provides the following: 'His imagery was never entirely masculine.' 'But if Sullivan married to reclaim his masculinity, the symbol alone would not guarantee success.' 'His obvious artistic inclinations could have been used to support rumours of his lack of manliness.'⁷ There is here a bizarre, but traditional, confusion of sexuality with gender. Were we to fail to read between the lines of propriety, we might come to the conclusion that Louis Sullivan was a woman.⁸

Louis and Dora are also connected through their given names, both of which allude to the currency, the object of exchange, that is gold. Our construction of joyous revenge is also a misread delivery of Adolf Loos' promise given when his entry to the 1913 Chicago Tribune Competition, an enormous black Doric column, failed to win: 'The great, Greek Doric column will one day be built. If not in Chicago, then in another city. If not for the Chicago Tribune, then for someone else. If not by me, then by another architect.'⁹

The project that we – other architects – have disseminated on to the city of Chicago constitutes another Doric column or order, a Greek gift, an allegorical projection. The centre of this ordering maelstrom is the site of the Tribune Tower built in 1925 from the designs of Hood and Howells, its base decoratively and significantly embedded with labelled fragments of buildings from many times and places, from the pyramids at Giza to the prison at Andersonville. These trophies, these excised parts of raided structures, are

as ornamental jewels set in the building's solid rectilinear base. This dissemination in reverse, this collection of destabilized and disembodied bits, is a generative paradigm for our allegorical project.

Naomi Schor, who explores the historical identification of the detail with femininity, writes:

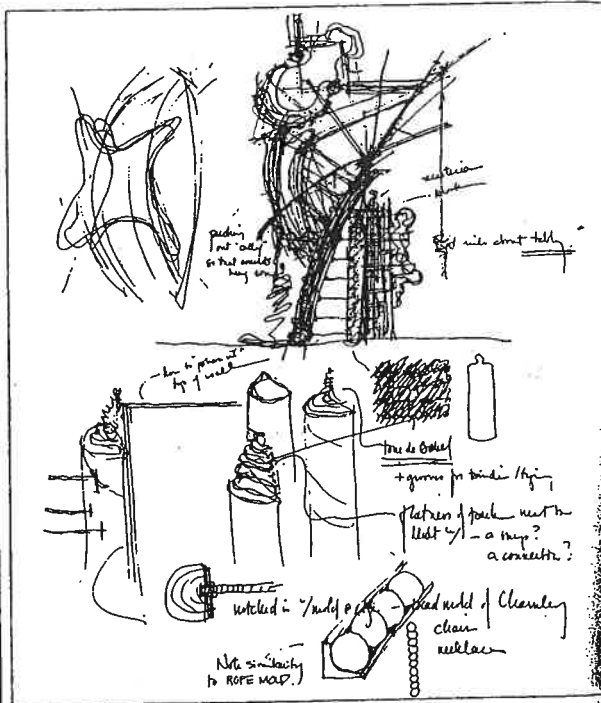
The detail with an allegorical vocation is distinguished by its 'oversignification' (Baudrillard): this is not a matter of realism, but of surrealism, if not hyperrealism. Finally, the allegorical detail is a disproportionately enlarged ornamental detail; bearing the seal of transcendence, it testifies to the loss of all transcendental signifieds in the modern period. In short, the modern allegorical detail is a parody of the traditional theological detail. It is the detail deserted by God.... The allegorical detail is a disembodied and destabilized detail.¹⁰

The disseminated parasites are fetishistic assemblages of such allegorical details joined by a technique akin to collage/montage, the underlying logic of which is a maximizing of possibilities of signification. They were generated formally from tiny amulets, fetishes, which themselves were generated by assembling domestic detritus associated with ornamentation (beads, bangles, feathers) and with structure (animal bones, metal wire) according to a set of formal moves and joining techniques derived from a study of the ornament of Sullivan. Words, the names of things, are used as switching mechanisms that serve as emblems of allegorical content. Going beyond collage/montage and into the logic of architecture, the material and techniques of making the joints themselves are also significant.

Here is an example of how such assemblage works: dory, Doric, and Dora as a kind of bartered bride, a gift, are the words that generate the door. These words set up an initial signifying network that suggests gift, gold, object of exchange, woman, vessel, Trojan horse, virus, opening, each of which connects to the others and which also is open to further crochet. The door proper is made from the sides of a boat that, ideally, would have been a dory. Because the boat we used lacked the V-shaped transom that would have made it a proper dory, a V-shaped transom in

its proper architectural location – above the door – was inserted; here, the word 'transom' was used as a switching mechanism between the transom of a boat and the transom of a door, both of which were required in order to render the boat a proper dory and the door a proper door. The sides of the boat, which form paired doors and define a slit-like opening, are covered with a ghostly ornamental pattern that resembles the white, lacy costume of a bride. Close inspection shows this to be the pattern of the soffit ornament from the

down the length of the door in proper architectural convention; yet, if you look closely, you will perceive a legibility here – the centre line, dots and dashes, is also a message in Morse code, naming this 'bad ornament'. The door carries further coding through appropriations of famous examples of the Freudian dream mechanisms of condensation and displacement: reinforcing and ornamental oyster shells, their paired opening-and-shutting forms echoing the form of the door itself, from whose recesses emerge long slivers of



arches at Sullivan's National Farmers' Bank at Owatonna, Minnesota. This particular piece of ornament, said to be the only one in the bank touched by the hand of Sullivan, was, according to his assistant, George Elmslie, who designed the ornament for the bank, the result of an overlay of Sullivan's corrections on to his original design. In Elmslie's opinion, this product of two 'ideas' was 'a bad ornament'.¹¹

The centre line of the door panel, used to register the ornamental pattern, is drawn in red dashes and dots

smooth sea glass tipped by red false fingernails.

Other primary generating words are colon, cow, fire and temple, all providing switching mechanisms among certain layers of the history of Chicago and materials and techniques of joining them that constitute these barnacle constructions. Assemblages of detritus of the street and home, combined with conventions of architectural design, construction, and iconography taken in limits of decidability, these objects represent both adherence to

contamination of the proper.

Generators

There is a lot of magic in the little spots of everyday life, if we take the time to notice it. It is a magic that connects us to each other, that is a form of knowledge. And it is a useful knowledge, a knowledge that John Ruskin knew. In a lecture given to the Architectural Association in 1857, Ruskin advised his audience to centre all the complex impulses involved in making architecture upon a single impulse: love. Love for the art which you practise. Love for 'the creation you work in the midst of'. And love for 'the creatures to whom you minister, your fellow men'. For, he goes on with respect to the last, 'if you do not love them, not only will you be little interested in the passing events of life, but in all your gazing at humanity, you will be apt to be struck only by outside form.'¹²

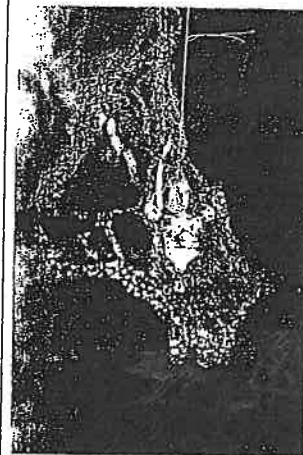
Events which influenced this project included the transformation of an enormous fat caterpillar found in our herb garden into a chrysalis, the chance recognition by a visiting student that a postcard on my studio wall, showing an ancient building in the south of France with a strange dovecot on its corner, was across the street from her family home, and a newspaper report on the rescue of two cows from a deep sinkhole. There is a name that vaguely suggests this kind of activity: euretics, a word coined by Gregory Ulmer and the title of his book in progress. Euretics is related to the obsolete word 'heuretics', a branch of logic expounding the rules of invention, which was in use in the seventeenth century – the word 'hermeneutic' was coined as its antonym then. It comes from the same Greek verb (*euriskein*) as Archimedes' *Eureka!*; the noun *eureka* has several connotations: an invention or discovery, a remedy, something that is found unexpectedly, and a founding (a child whose proper parental lineage is unknown).¹³

The eureka construction is both entirely and potentially; it is thoroughly generative. It is situated in the muddy ground between theory and practice. And so, it will be important to bear in mind that our eureka project is not an architecture unto itself, but a genera-

tive architectural mapping (built theory) – waiting to spawn, to embed its parts into another architecture.

Hitherto, however, we have been considering only the circumstances in architecture favourable to the development of the powers of the imagination. A yet more important point for us seems, to me, the place which it gives to all the objects of imagination.

For, I suppose, you will not wish me to spend any time in proving that imagination must be vigorous in propor-



tion to the quantity of material which it has to handle; and that, just as we increase the range of what we see, we increase the richness of what we can imagine. Granting this, consider what a field is opened to your fancy merely in the subject matter which architecture admits. Nearly every other art is severely limited in its subjects – the landscape painter, for instance, gets little help from the aspects of beautiful humanity; the historical painter, less perhaps than he ought, from the accidents of wild nature; and the pure sculptor, still less from the minor details of common life. But is there anything within range of sight, or conception, which may not be of use to you, or in which your interest may not be excited with advantage to your art? From visions of angels, down to the least important gesture of a child at play, whatever may be conceived of Divine, or beheld of Human, may be dared or adopted by you; throughout the kingdom of animal life, no creature is so vast, or so minute, that

Our eureka project is a generative architectural mapping waiting to spawn

Far left, *Tables of Bower* project, full-scale construction study from Jennifer Bloomer's sketchbook. Above, *Amulet/Generative Object*, after Louis Sullivan; cartilage, bone, glass beads, copper wire

you cannot deal with it, or bring it into service; the lion and the crocodile will couch about your shafts; the moth and the bee will sun themselves upon your flowers; for you, the fawn will leap; for you, the snail be slow; for you, the dove smooth her bosom; and the hawk spread her wings toward the south. All the side world of vegetation blooms and bends for you; the leaves tremble that you may bid them be still under the marble snow; the thorn and the thistle, which the earth casts forth as evil, are to you the kindest servants; no dying petal nor drooping tendril is so feeble as to have no help for you; no robed pride of blossom so kingly but it will lay aside its purple to receive at your hands the pale immortality. Is there anything in common life too mean, in common things too trivial, to be ennobled by your touch? As there is nothing in life, so there is nothing in lifelessness which has not its lesson for you, or its gift; and when you are tired of watching the strength of the plume and the tenderness of the leaf, you may walk down to your rough river shore or into the thickest markets of your thoroughfare; and there is not a piece of torn cable that will not twine into a perfect moulding; there is not a fragment of cast-away matting or shattered basketwork that will not work into a chequer or capital. Yes; and if you gather up the very sand, and break the stone on which you tread, among its fragments of all but invisible shells you will find forms that will take their place, and that proudly, among the starred traceries of your vaulting; and you, who can crown the mountain with its fortress and the city with its towers are thus able also to give beauty to ashes and worthiness to dust.¹⁴

Those were the words of John Ruskin. It is Ruskin, after all, who reminds us that a carbuncle is not only a grotesque growth on the proper body, but also a strange precious stone that emits a light in the darkness.¹⁵

The site of this practice is the academy, an institution as solidly invested in important ways in the status quo as those in which dominant architectural practices are contained. And so, this practice of inquiring into things we do not know, that are not part of a proper curriculum, is also a growth on the face of pedagogical practice. It is itself an invention – practical theory: practice as research, theory as construction. And it is a form of inquiry that

reinforces the notion of architecture as a system of representation and citation that exceeds its function and role in the economy; whether it is of an acritical neo-classicism or allegorically monstrous, or somewhere in between.

The line between this practice – research – and pedagogical practice is indistinct. The allegorically monstrous construction is potentially a vehicle for teaching many things at once, and teaching architecturally: joining disparate materials into cohesive, however complex, wholes. This particular work, a kind of domestication of architectural method, is open to and insistent upon a knowledge of the conventions of architecture, while maintaining a resistant, critical stance. Such small pieces, generative objects, can engender a wide variety of building possibilities, from the culturally critical and resistant to the most conservative.

It is a small thing, this practice: a tiny practice, a minor practice. It is perhaps to the body of conventional practices as ornament is to structure. Supplemental: small, but excessive; supplying a lack.

1. Catherine Ingraham, 'The Faults of Architecture: Troping the Proper', *Assemblage* 7, October 1988, Cambridge: MIT Press, pp.7-13.

2. See *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (*Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels*, 1928), London: Verso, 1977.

3. This substitution of one question for the other is taken from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. See *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and*

Schizophrenia (1972), translated by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane, University of Minnesota Press, 1983, p.109ff.

4. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1975), trans. Dana Polan, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, p.17.

5. *New York Times*, 16 April 1924, p.23.

6. Larry Millett, *The Curve of the Arch*, Minneapolis: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1985, p.47.

7. Robert Twombly, *Louis Sullivan: His Life and Work*, New York: Viking Press, 1986, p.211.

8. The preceding two paragraphs are taken from Jennifer Bloomer, 'D'or', *Sexuality and Space*, edited by Beatriz Colomina, Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992, pp. 162-183.

9. *The Architecture of Adolf Loos*, catalogue of an exhibition organized by Yehuda Safran and Wilfried Wang, London: Arts Council, 1987, p.60.

10. Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine*, New York: Methuen, 1987, p.45.

11. Millet, op.cit.

12. John Ruskin, 'Influences of Imagination in Architecture', *The Two Paths*, New York: John Wiley and Son, 1865, pp.143-147.

13. Liddell and Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, p.331.

14. John Ruskin, 'Influences of Imagination in Architecture', pp.138-140.

15. John Ruskin, *Lectures on Architecture and Painting*, London: The Waverley Book Company Ltd, 1854, p.84.



Left, *Tables of Bower project*, corner barnacle study from Jennifer Bloomer's sketchbook

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