

Shadowy figures and strange interiors: The optician's waiting room

'When there is nothing to do, you do nothing slowly and intently.'
Haruki Murikami ¹

The waiting room can be imagined as a frequently visited place, a place to loiter, sit or perhaps stand, walk and converse. A transitional point before entering or moving to another in which no actual movements of the journey occur but time is implied. As equally the waiting room becomes a world of objects, boots, hats, papers and toys, transient temporal landmarks. Markers of time that are now, yesterday, tomorrow, last week or hours and moments of the day. A detailed study of an interior could be seen as offering a kind of still life, a material existence where nothing exceptional occurs, where states appear continuous and there is a wholesale eviction of the event. The room imagined forcing close attention, an opportunity to look at the overlooked, to bring into view objects that might normally be screened out, and in this, things may appear radically unfamiliar and estranged.²

This paper attends to the 'Sparrow Collection' of the Auckland Museum and a series of six photographs of the interior of an optician's waiting room (1947). Here the photographer has captured a narrow hall that connects a shadowy waiting room with an optometrist's work rooms. Time appears heavy and slow. Looming figure mark the entrance and exit, controlling devices that become a sign of occupation and are sentinels destined to wait forever.

Architectural historians often used photography as a record of artefacts and an imprint of the constructed world. As equally they can be images crafted toward a particular communicative goal.³ Photography, still life and architecture are intertwined in the discussion of this project, raising questions around representation and the actual experience of the building, the photographic surface transforming the tectonic and spatial into the spectacular, where things become estranged and not of this world. The waiting room in this paper is seen, not as an answer but rather as a marking of time and is explored as a point of mobility and temporary arrest, a type of still life, a place where the fixed and mobile converge.

'Although waiting rooms, train stations, airports, or hotel lobbies are merely to be passed through...waiting is not simply a passage of time to be traversed. Although time is supposed to function like a door or a hall through which we pass unawares, in waiting, the door jams and the hall is endless. The hour does not pass. The line does not move. Time must suddenly be endured rather than traversed, felt rather than thought. In waiting time is slow and thick.'⁴

A waiting still life

The still life in its ordinariness and familiarity is the depiction of mostly inanimate objects, commonplace objects offering a different way of viewing a familiar world. The comforting familiarity everyday objects invite may alter ways of thinking through the habitual and unexamined. The eye moving from point to point, vision shifting unhurried over a familiar scene and becomes a narrative. Art historian Norman Bryson writes in 'Looking at the overlooked',

¹ Murakami, Haruki, *Dance dance dance*, trans. Alfred Birnbaum, London, Penguin, 1994. Pg. 59

² Bryson, Norman, *Looking at the overlooked: four essays on still life painting*, London, Reaktion Books, 1990. Pg. 87

³ Maria Antonella Pelizzari, and Paolo Scrivano, 'Intersection of Photography and Architecture - Introduction', *Visual Resources: An International Journal of Documentation*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2011, pp. 107-112. Pg. 107

⁴ Schweizer, Harold, *On Waiting*, Thinking in action, Edited by Richard Kearney Simon Critchley, London, New York, Routledge, 2008. Pg. 2

'But in these narratives, which tell only of a brief journey across a corner of everyday life, nothing significant happens: there is no transfiguration or epiphany, no sudden disclosure of transcendence. The eye moved lightly and without activity: it is at home.'⁵

In this light a still life offers close attention and brings into view objects that may normally be missed. Objects and ephemera, setting the structure of the scene. The absence of form making it '... precarious if all that were needed to destroy it were the body's physical return...if the body is just around the corner, and likely to re-enter the field of vision at any moment.'⁶ Without human scale the narrative is lost and objects take centre stage. But what of the narratives that build between objects, a narrative that is elaborated by the juxtaposition of objects and their relationship to their surroundings? The life of a table and chairs, the artefacts that surrounds the subject, the world of routine and repetition, small scale, inconsequential, unremarkable acts of things standing still.⁷ In that effacement of human attention and the unassuming objects, coats, boots, vases and flowers, toys and magazines, everyday objects make the work. A still life functions as a part of a construction, concealing uncertain connections, interrupting space and reaffirming connections. Obscure subjects and symbolic clues become part of a narrative that is framed within a space.

Space, time and object create a strange weave, where uniqueness and duration merge.⁸ The negation of waiting and the distractions by which it can be forgotten, entertainment on a television, computer games, toys and snacks and where clocks appear to have stopped. The waiting room becomes a world of objects, boots, hats, coats and clocks, a lack of securely fixed temporal landmarks. Markers of time (now / yesterday / tomorrow / days of the week / hours and moments of the day]. The measuring of time, isolating hours and rhythms of present instants, figures linger at the doorway, compelled to wait. The waiting room becomes a room of anticipated action, stillness and narrative waiting to unfold.

Sparrow Industrial Pictures and the Lister Building

The optician's clinic sited in the Lister Building, 9 Victoria Street East Auckland was designed by architect Thomas Mullions and constructed in 1924-25. Named for a British surgeon and medical scientist Joseph Lister, the corner site followed the Chicago style intended as offices for medical practitioners and dentists.⁹ Architect T.F. Haughey remodelled the rooms in 1947 for Thomas F. Lowes and Son.

Documenting the interior was photographer Arthur Sparrow who began Sparrow Industrial Pictures in 1939 and by the 1960's was the largest commercial industrial photographic firm in New Zealand.¹⁰ Advertising agencies, civil engineers and architectural firms, department stores, manufacturers, building contractors and oil companies were clients and pictures of construction sites and window displays were amongst their regular assignments.¹¹ Sparrow was a regular contributor of articles to

⁵ Bryson, Norman, *Looking at the overlooked: four essays on still life painting*, London, Reaktion Books, 1990. Pg. 93

⁶ Bryson, Norman, 'Chardin and the Text of Still Life', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 15, no. 2, 1989, pp. 227-252. Pg. 228

⁷ Bryson refers to the Xenia of things, '...things standing still, nature repose, things at rest; such things as fruit baskets of flowers, loaves of bread, ewers, pitchers, platters, fish, seafood, game – the familiar repertoire...' Bryson, *Looking at the overlooked*. Pg. 17

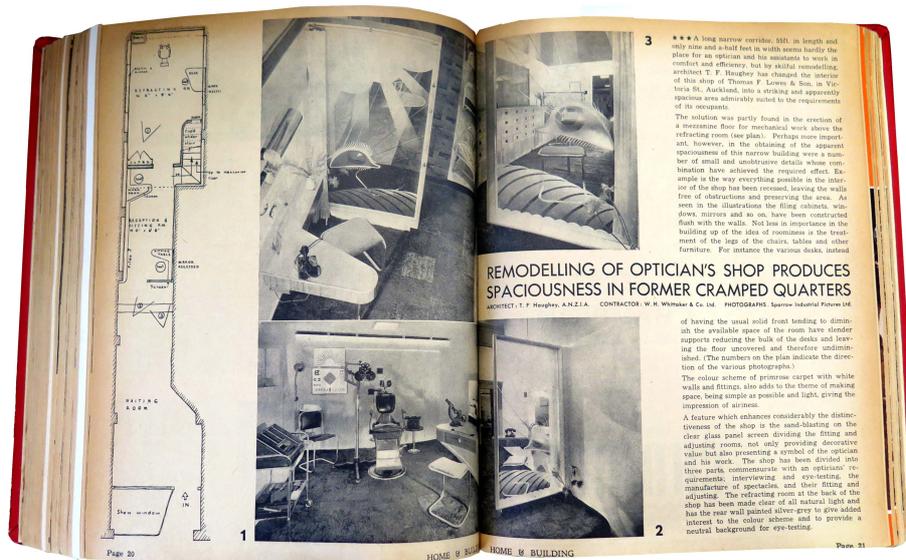
⁸ Borden, Iain 'A short history of Photography'. Pg. 250. In, 'Imaging architecture: the uses of photography in the practice of architectural history', *The Journal of Architecture*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2007, pp. 57-77. Pg. 71

⁹ Historic Places Category 2, 9-17 Victoria Street East, Auckland. <http://www.heritage.org.nz/the-list>

¹⁰ Arthur Sparrow died in 1966 and the firm's photographic negative collection was donated to the Auckland War Memorial Museum. Maitland, G. (August 1989). The Sparrow Photograph Collection. *Auckland War Memorial Museum News*, pp. 1-2.

¹¹ Maitland, Gordon, 'Dictionary of New Zealand Biography', 'Sparrow, Arthur George William from the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography. *Te Ara- the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*. , <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/5s36/sparrow-arthur-george>-william.<http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/5s36/sparrow-arthur-george-william>

periodicals such as 'Home and Building' and 'New Zealand Manufacturer' writing about methods of photography and the 'work of the photographer'.¹²



'Remodelling of Optician's Shop Produces Spaciousness in Former Cramped Quarters', *Home and Building*, vol. X, no. 1, March / June 1947, pp. 20-21. [Architecture Archive](#), [Architecture + Planning Library / Te Herenga whaihanga](#), [University of Auckland Library / Te Tumu Herenga](#)

The remodelled room is described as a long narrow corridor, 55ft. in length and only 9½ feet in width, including a mezzanine floor and a number of recessed details. 'As seen in the illustrations the filing cabinets, windows, mirrors and so on, have been constructed flush with the walls. No less in importance in the building up of the idea of roominess is the treatment of the legs of the chairs, tables and other furniture. For instance, the various desks instead of having the usual solid front tending to diminish the available space of the room have slender supports reducing the bulk of the desks and leaving the floor uncovered and therefore undiminished.'¹³

Of particular interest are a series of six images of the remodeled interior, four of which were published in *Home and Building* (1947).¹⁴ Two of the images focus on the waiting room; two are of the optician's practice room and the others the reception room. Two of the six images show a figure lurking in the background at the edges of the waiting room, manipulating light and forcing strange perspectives the length of the room, a *mise en scène* lost in the published images.

¹² See Sparrow, A. G. W. (March 1945). Photographing Homes: How a Professional Photographer works. *Home and Building*, 8(1), 16-17, 39. Sparrow, A. G. W. (June 1945). Photographing that Interior. *Home and Building*, 8(2), 22 - 23, 45.

¹³ 'Remodelling of Optician's Shop Produces Spaciousness in Former Cramped Quarters', *Home and Building*, pp. 20-21.

¹⁴ 'Remodelling of Optician's Shop Produces Spaciousness in Former Cramped Quarters', *Home and Building*, pp. 20-21.



Sparrow Industrial Pictures Ltd. (1947). [Opticians clinic]. Auckland War Memorial Museum –Tāmaki Paenga Hira. PH-. - NEG - 3292E + PH-. - NEG-. - 3292C.

Strange interiors and the dentist's photographs

A dramatic play of light reaches across the waiting room of the optometrist's office. Shadows are driven across surfaces and hang in gathered folds at the end of a slender hallway. Photographs of ghosts and other presences hover at the limits the frame of the photograph, a residue of a past moment caught in the light and frame imaginative engagement. Objects plucked from the everyday are given purpose and made invisible as they become actors in a strange still scene. An inventory of objects under the lingering gaze of the waiter, primrose carpets, white walls, fittings, two side tables, three chairs, one couch, two vases and six chrysanthemums, a stool, an ashtray stand, four cushions, a clock, magazines and papers.¹⁵ Everyday detail and objects that wish to rejoin the whole and become a narratives of waiting.

'Just as the waiter cannot listen to the melody of her inner life with her eyes closed, the room that waiting prepares for her is no longer the quotidian space of functional, invisible objects among which she lives and moves blindly are but a location in which objects acquire uncanny particularity...each object is dragged out of its invisibility to have its particularity exposed to the curious, indifferent gaze of the waiter who finds in the accidental phenomenology of things, only a mirror image of her own fortuitous existence.'¹⁶

The fixing of the shadow becomes an ephemeral moment to a permanent representation, the photograph seizes the instant, the shadow connecting the observer, objects and their representation. Freezing time, the still life renders the room and its occupant's prisoners of a particular moment. Patterns and striations shape the light into monsters, luminescence and shadow extend arms and legs fracturing them into foreboding patterns.

'All I would see behind me would be the ordinary constituents of whatever happened to be there at that moment making up the scene, not some unnerving hallucination. It's not as if

¹⁵ 'Remodelling of Optician's Shop Produces Spaciousness in Former Cramped Quarters', *Home and Building*, pp. 20-21.

¹⁴ Schweizer, Harold, *On Waiting*, Pg. 6

some limping doppelganger has been born into substance to stalk me. There is no such disfigured embodiment of the mind's invisible preoccupation lurking at my side. Yet I still feel something akin to the prickling of the scalp that supposedly betokens such theatrical hauntings.¹⁷

Projected shadows are exaggerated, distorted and magnified transforming objects into hybrid beings. Here the interior becomes a passive machine, where the casting of shadows animates the structures and objects it plays across. Shadows transform, obscuring objects and highlighting their details, evoking space and time, past and future, embodying and disembodying, a counterpart and an echo.¹⁸

As equally this waiting room offers a kind of stability, in things not changing. Objects appear to have given themselves over to disuse, abandoned by human attention, suspended and waiting. The observer is excluded from the scene picturing a world before the subject entered, or after departing from it. Objects are robbed of clues, their cause and context appear fragmented, discontinuous whose relation to one another is concealed or re-configured. Space is made uncanny, or haunted by the slippage between their everyday function and the ideas or myths implied.

In these images a shadowed figure appears to turn his back to the scene of the still life refusing the connection with the objects that fill the scene. The camera offers another implication of a world, a life beyond the material context of architecture, capturing bits and pieces of life. What results is not a finished designed architectural interior but a means of visualizing the world as a constructed allegorical scene. The scene of the waiting room appears less about the designed vision and more about the space itself. The interior becomes almost dream like, consigned to a veiled past, requiring the viewer to reconstruct its place in history. Reducing the somewhat complex scene to two dimensions, without sound, smell or other sensations. The photographer perhaps, addressing the conceptual source of the project through its corporeal form. The room imagined.

Conclusion

In waiting the mundane becomes visible and the writing of this paper has perhaps offered a kind of fiction, taking real facts and weaving them into something else, much like the photographs and the mise en scène that it reveals. The shaping of the space as designed, its impact of the forms as aesthetic '...in the obtaining of the apparent spaciousness of this narrow building were a number of small and unobtrusive details whose combination have achieved the required effect.'¹⁹ The interpretive function of reading architecture or the built environment as a text or picture allows the symbolic and the representational to be seen. Looking at indeterminate spaces disorder instead of order, indeterminacy in places of order as they are used, distorted and reinvented with meaning.

The waiting room proposes returning movements of time in which nothing happens or changes, empty planes of duration where waiting opens into infinite lack. To reveal the strange in the familiar releases the hidden narrative of objects that are frequently overlooked or taken for granted. Through depicting the world through a different set of eyes may give life to what are often considered empty objects,. The photograph of shadows and still objects blurs the moment of detail and plays with recognition and misrecognition, a haunted material trace. Waiting is no longer the ordinary space of functional invisible objects among which we move blindly but a location in which object have acquired uncanny particularity. Magazines, lamps, chairs, flowers, carpets and wallpaper expose their invisibility and yet in the whole resume their invisibility. Waiting becomes still life neither moving forward or backward, space and time expands to flat, tedious dimensions, a waiters enforced passivity. Sitting somewhere between absentmindedness and awkwardness the waiter sits within the spell of the story, an uncanny sense of duration unfolds the materiality of the space.

¹⁷ Arthur, Chris, 'Room, Empty', *Irish Pages*, vol. 3, no. 2, The Home Place, 2006, pp. 43-58. Pg. 43

¹⁸ 'Shadows describe objects at rest making possible projections which speak of absent objects, objects which belong to memory and therefore to the power of imagination.' Frascari, Marco, 'A Secret Semiotic Skiagraphy: The Corporeal Theatre of Meanings in Vincenzo Scamozzi's Idea of Architecture', *VIA*, vol. 11, 1990, pp. 32-43.

Pg. 36

¹⁹ 'Remodelling of Optician's Shop Produces Spaciousness in Former Cramped Quarters', *Home and Building*, pp. 20-21.

'...the waiter must live the hour, feel it, embody it, perform it willy-nilly, in his characteristic vacillation which manifests itself, as we shall see, in his agitation, his pacing, his glances and his watch, his fixation on objects.'²⁰

²⁰ Schweizer, Pg. 17