

FRANK LIU with SUSAN HEDGES

INTERSTICES 20

Confabulations: Estranged memories and the unfolding home

Stories foster affect, character and emotion, qualities that mirror our lived environments. We relay narratives every day of our lives for numerous reasons: to share, to hide, to dream or to remember. Much like a speech or a conversation, stories exist as a form of communication which directs the human imagination (Davis, 2017: xx-xxi). These narratives are nomadic, travelling beyond the spoken or written word and can equally be expressed as a set of drawings, objects or photographs. Such mediums construct a spatial project whose poetic nature has storytelling potential. While narratives are a crucial element to design, they can often become abstracted, overlooked or withdrawn in the face of analytic methods (Emmons & Phinney, 2017: 2).

From an early age, stories edify and prepare us with moral lessons through an allegorical language. Fictions such as fairy-tale and fables teach us how to act and behave in the world, providing assurances for a happier future and solutions for adverse situations. These stories are seen as childhood worlds that are cherished, explored and inhabited. Yet as we age, they are inevitably left behind and forgotten in the passing of time. This research is founded on an understanding of story-telling as an essential method of design. In particular, architect Paul Emmons, author Phinney Luc, and academic Carolina Dayer's (2017) anthology, *Confabulations: Storytelling in Architecture*, provided this project with its focus on narrative, nostalgia and the domestic.

Confabulation, a process of filling in memory lapses, establishes a narrative where the real and the imagined intersect as stories within existing settings (Davis, 2017: 1). The word 'confabulate' derives from *fabula*, Latin for tale or fable,¹ and emphasises a drawing together of fractured experiences. It suggests a world-making where imagination and fictions are integral in its processes. As Emmons writes, "confabulation is to be of two minds, to be in two places at once, to experience, counterfactually, simultaneous irreconcilable truths" (2017: 3). Such duality is used in this research as a means for illustrating my childhood daydreams. It calls up a return to home that is existing yet equally illusive.

This work is concerned with revealing and re-animating domestic spaces which can be considered invisible, lost, or concealed. In the process, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's (1785-1863) fairy tale *Hansel and Gretel*, was hybridized with memories

peculiar to my first ever home. By merging memories of the tale with ones of my own, I examine how character, dialogue and memory can confabulate unique interiors. The output, a sequence of staged artefacts, eschews traditional spatial descriptions formed by plans, sections and elevations, investigating instead how collage and pop-up book formats may tell space differently. This approach, with its folding dynamic, offers a display that is both tangible *yet* fleeting, and a telling that folds personal narratives into perennial ones.

Witnessing my childhood home

This project was initiated by certain old photographs taken of my first home. Shot by my elder sister, the pictures showed our home tidied and readied for potential buyers. Yet, stripped back as the spaces were, I could still recall in these photos our previous messy and vital living arrangements. This double-ness found in the photos suggested the action of confabulation, where actual and imagined spatial occupancy mingled.

Revisiting my childhood suburb offered a similar doubling of space and memory. Home there emerged as another country whose childhood geography was largely forgotten. Still, I was able to recall worlds created when crawling beneath chairs or traversing the kitchen floor, itself experienced as a vast open field whose expanse demanded consideration and exploration. Cabinets, unreachable, soared overhead as unknown territory, while tabletops called for climbing and ascending. Such scale shifts, difficult to comprehend now, offer ineffable memories.

Fleeting stories: Hansel and Gretel and the duality of home

As a child, *Hansel and Gretel* seemed neither evil nor distorted. More broadly, it is a fairytale held to be reassuring, and hopeful, for its future-orientated telling promises a happy ending (Bettelheim, 1989: 352). Similarly, my childhood home was neither unfavourable nor adverse; it entailed a world where day-to-day memories accumulated easily and where ordinary domesticity was interlaced with the magical and the mysterious. My future reencounter with this variegated domesticity has utilised pictorial collage and pop-up techniques as methods to craft a confabulating narrative.

Hansel and Gretel particularly, read to me from the space between twin beds in my bedroom, was linked to the old wooden cabinet housing our bedtime reading. As such, furnishings and stories were imbricated and suggested for this project the affinity stories might have with enclosed or interior realms. Drawing from *Hansel and Gretel* five allegorical motifs, I devised a series of fictitious interiors and furniture types, themselves standing in for characters as narrating agents. While initially a method for visually recreating the story spatially, storing and collecting subsequently emerged as a key concern. In turn, collected and collaged components were assigned five themes extracted from the tale: excess, estrangement, famine, deceit and fattening. For example: the forest became an interior of estrangement; the gingerbread house, an interior of fattening; Hansel and Gretel's home, an interior of famine; and their mother's room, an interior for excess and deceit.



The Estranged Interior

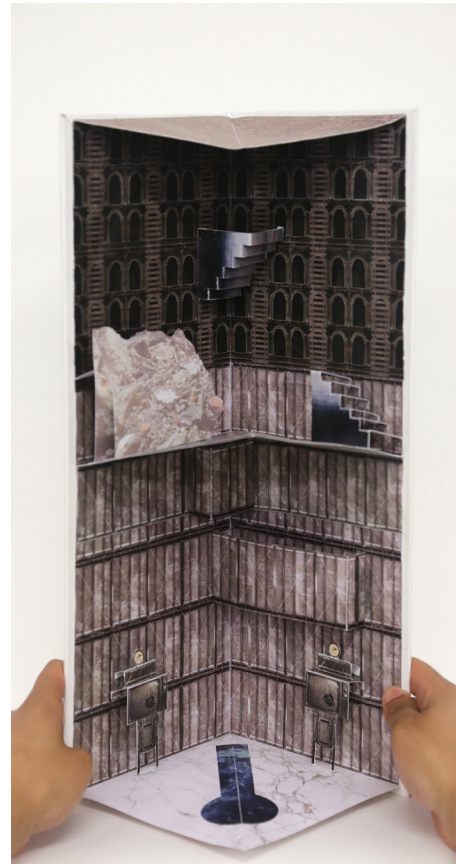
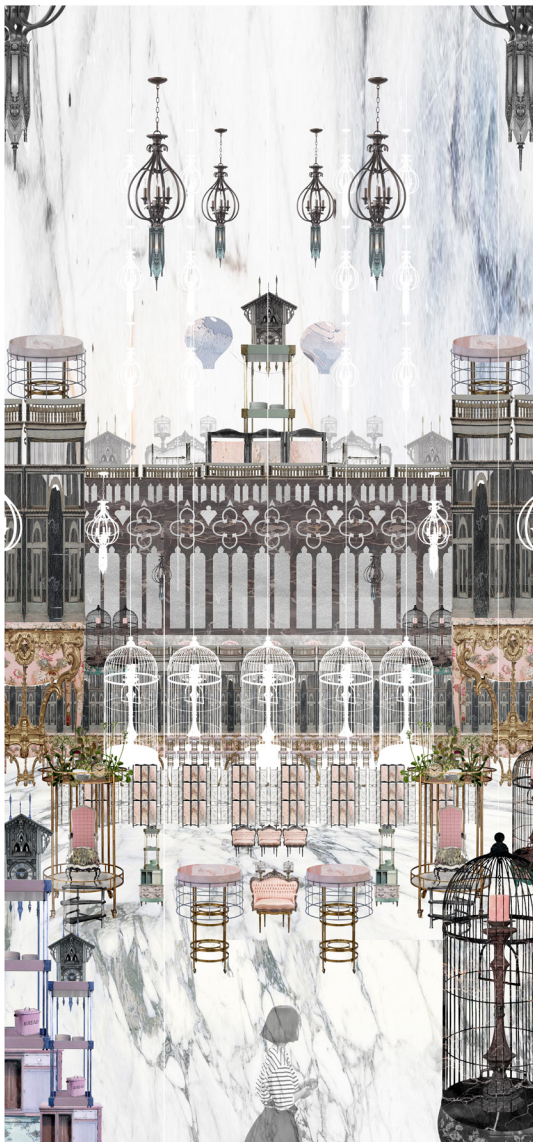


Fig. 1a, 1b Frank Liu (2019). *Estranged Interior*: the rippling of water and the fracturing of television screens signify moments in which space is paused and time feels seemingly eternal. Incomplete staircases, broken compasses, repeated railway tracks and concrete partitions suggest the children's inability to escape isolation and navigate their way home. [Digital collage and pop-up]

The story, reconceived as rooms of accumulated items, suggested how lives and characters are both extended in space and time, but also how memory ossifies as images. Collected and curated, these images, rich in symbols and metaphoric languages, reveal a capacity to re-narrate and divert stories. As Jennifer Shields notes, the collage-effects resulting from collecting, far from restoring original settings, set them in motion through “the creation of a new context[s,... contexts] standing in a metaphorical, rather than a contiguous, relation to the world of everyday life” (2014). The *Hansel and Gretel* tale drawn from my childhood offered a partial story on which to suture my fragmented memories, and through the process of confabulation, it became a means for reimagining both the tale and myself.



The Fattened Interior



Fig. 2a, 2b Frank Liu (2019). *Fattened Interior*: juxtapositions surrounding the tale's themes of gluttony and paucity are expressed through ideas of collecting, hoarding, and entrapment. The metabolising of the home is imagined as the witch's hoarding of excessive materiality through marbled tiles, gilded cages and pink cushioned chairs. Objects and furnishings are constructed as hybrids of materiality. While these can be seen as indulgent, excessive, and ornamental, they are also expressions of deficiency, offering a sense of thinness and lack. [Digital collage and pop-up]

Popping-up

Intensifying this confabulation, the pop-up effects of pages as they unfold at creases and corners aimed to capture the uncanniness of domestic places. A double-ness was pursued in which fragmented images clarify when stood up and viewed certain ways, but merge together when collapsed. Hence, surfaces, objects and furniture are constituted through vacancies and voids in surfaces deploying both recognition and that recognition's undermining. As Marian Macken suggests, the pop-up demands, through its structure of cutting and folding, processes of inference in which frontal views persist without the information side



The Famed Interior



Fig. 3a, 3b Frank Liu (2019). *Famed Interior*: a version of Hansel and Gretel's home, vertical coffins and mannequins of the stepmother suggest death and brutality—a room of little or no empathy. Venus fly-traps hint at the carnivorous nature of the witch, where remnants, preserved in jars are ossified and last forever. [Digital collage and pop-up]

elevations might further provide (2018: 81). As such, speculation and inhabitation coexist within pop-ups contrary built or modelled objects. The opening and the turning of pages in pop-up books offer, through anticipation and imagination, a platform for reverie.

Pop-up narratives in turn suggest a portal into the temporal—in other words, coexistent worlds paralleled in interiors by daydreams—and as flimsy, mobile interiors, their mechanics inherently confabulate.



Fig. 4 Frank Liu (2019). View of the final installation. [Photograph]

Assembling home

The project has recreated my childhood home through four interiors: *The Room of Books & Tales*, *The Master Bedroom*, *The Shared Bedroom* and *The Confabulated Lounge*. Correspondingly these rooms link with family members: firstly my sister, where *The Room of Books & Tales* speaks to the abundance of narratives and novels savoured by her; secondly my mother, whose *Master Bedroom* made for me a daytime place to hide and day-dream in; and thirdly my father, with the *Shared Bedroom* being that space my father and I shared for many years. Lastly, *The Confabulated Lounge* speaks of the routine gathering of my family and the making of home more broadly.

The project culminates as a series of unfolding books describing four interior quadrants. Each gives two opposing corners of a room requiring the reader/viewer to merge the opposing parts into one whole space. Cupboard-like, these pop-ups allow explorations of hidden, interior worlds within worlds. The provisional nature of the pop-up, unfolding with the opening of a page, suggests a world without stable perspective. Unlike architectural models, pop-ups can be opened, closed and folded away flat. They are suggestive of a spatiality which is dormant, asleep, ready to be awakened. Similarly, the spaces pop-ups construct with thin card frontages are fragile and manifestly artificial. They replicate the fragility of memories themselves and the reworking of recollections into confabulated images, which in this project, entailed arduously propping tenuous personal narratives against the more substantive one of *Hansel and Gretel*.

While domestic estrangement motivated the exploration of my first home and its now remote settings, confabulation permitted a weaving of facts, memories and fiction into possible future worlds deeply interconnected with those already existing (Emmons and Phinney, 2017: 3). Through this exploration, I arrived at a richer and more nuanced understanding of what story-telling and pop-up imaging has to offer spatial design. Importantly, confabulation opens a way of being at home with the plethora of other temporalities making up life itself.

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ENDNOTES

1 The word confabulation offers two variant definitions; it not only illustrates an expression of narrative or language, but also describes a psychological condition where the mind fabricates memories to fill in what cannot be remembered. Confabulation 'Confabulate' Oxford Dictionaries. Last modified Accessed 18/03/2019, 2019. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/confabulate>