

A Conversation with Sarah Oppenheimer, Part I

Participants:

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Sarah Oppenheimer, Artist

The following conversation took place on April 14, 2022 and the transcripts were edited by the participants.

Teresa: To start, could you talk about the title of the work?

Sarah: Certainly! To a large extent, I imagine our built environment as an array. Generic spatial zones are reproduced in different permutations. The UT Austin campus is a wonderful example of this. The construction company, Beck, their subcontractors, and the architecture team, have designed and built multiple buildings across UT's campus. The footbridge where [C-010106](#) is sited is unique but not singular. The team uses the same tools, codes, materials, workflow logic, and so forth in other buildings and locations on campus. They operate within an architectural vocabulary, a building information and management model, where digital and physical objects are identical.

The titles of my work identify these generic spatial conditions. I've created a classification system that encodes relationships, such as orientation and spatial adjacency. What's next to what? What flows from one zone to another zone? [C-010106](#) is located within a footbridge, and borders two discrete spaces, above and below. The title describes the circulatory pathways between these spaces.

Each digit in the title is derived from this alphanumeric code. The first digit indicates a how the piece operates. "C" designates "cinema," referring to the projection of light on a planar surface. In [C-010106](#), views are displaced and re-sequenced. What appears over is under, what appears under is through.

The second digit of the title indicates the position of the work within a greater array: the number of spatial zones that the piece spans. The designator zero, signifies two spaces (A and B). The remaining digits describe the directional flow of light, air, and passage between these two spatial zones. If another piece shares these spatial relationships, it would have the same title. The system is simple and generic.

Andrée: That's an interesting segue to my question: how do you align yourself in the tradition of other practicing artists, or in the broader art historical realm?

Sarah: I'm interested in artists, architects, and thinkers whose work extends and expands our patterned entanglements. These engagements do not need to involve objects – or even artworks for that matter.

In the 1980's, sociologist [William Whyte](#) performed an extensive empirical study of social circulation through public squares. Using time-lapse photography, Whyte identified patterns in habitation, such as pedestrians flocking towards sunlight in winter, and shade in summer. Whyte's studies, among others, have enabled me to anticipate circulatory paths and to imagine how patterns might be tweaked and distorted.

But Whyte's time-lapse stills are frozen - and I'm aiming to stretch these discrete intervals into an entangled continuum. [Lygia Clark](#)'s work investigates this temporal threshold. She proposed an organic line, a boundary that differentiates the temporality of organic and inorganic materials. Her work uses the tactile transmission of energy to manipulate this boundary, playing between time scales. This is also true of [Eileen Gray](#), in part because her architecture seems to be driven by gestural pattern. Both her furniture and architecture amplify bodily action.

Andrée: It's interesting that your points of reference are spatial and relational, as opposed to more purely formal. When Teresa and I were first talking about artists we would associate with qualities of your work, [Gordon Matta-Clark](#) came up and [Dan Graham](#) too. Do you ever think about your work in relation to them?

Sarah: Well, I think those artists are very different from one another. Matta-Clark performed a kind of social extraction – by cutting through an uninhabited building, he severed it from its functional pathways. This recalls Duchamp's readymades: an object is taken out of circulation and becomes aesthetic form. Graham's work, on the other hand, engages with relationships across the fabric of a built space. He creates complex temporal relationships through overlapping media, exploring how time is a result of media processing: the glass screen, the camera, video, the printed magazine. While I'm interested in these questions, I hope my work suggests a relationship to the material environment that is at once unmediated and reproducible.

My work manipulates paths of circulation. Objects, bodies, light, air flow, are re-routed along new circulatory pathways. Lina Bo Bardi's [glass easels](#) come to mind as a relevant material precedent to [C-010106](#).

Teresa: But... I wasn't even thinking about cutting and splitting when I mentioned Gordon Matta-Clark—I was thinking much more about his project [Food](#), and his interest in language in public space like his work with graffiti. I was coming at those projects

with an understanding that there's something about urban space and architecture as a performative aesthetic. And that Matta-Clark was intensely interested in the bowels of buildings. That's the way that I was approaching this particular aspect of your work. Porosity—the idea of a building as a porous, not only physical—but social and political structure.

Sarah: Yes, [Food](#) is surely relevant to this question.

Teresa, I have a question for you. I'm curious about the idea of a performative aesthetic. I'm wondering how you see that happening here.

Teresa: Well, I'm not entirely sure what or where I'm trying to get to—it's mostly just trying to get closer to understanding. On the one hand you talk about pattern behavior, but I would translate that as human interaction. It reminds me of [Lisa Robertson](#)'s work. She's a writer, mostly prose and poetry, but I thought about one of her books when I saw your work in progress. It's titled, [Occasional Work and the Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture](#). It's a short read and she takes on the voice of a person who experiences the exterior environment as though it's an interior room. She does this on seven structured walks in and around buildings in Vancouver, and I see some resonance with your work.

I think about the Latin and Norse roots of the word, window: vindr (wind) auga (eye) and I think about the Latin roots of the word, aperture: about that being an opening, to open, to uncover; and then I think about all of that not from a statistical or even an empirical position, but rather from a position exploring the relationship between visibility and materiality.

I'm also interested in the role of trespass with your work, and porosity. Those are the words that I wrote down in my journal when I saw your work in progress. I appreciate the language of your titles, and I'm interested in the kind of language used in architecture, for example: a gut renovation. It always comes back to the body as experienced in time and place. That might be uninteresting to you, but for me it makes for a deeply meaningful and memorable experience that that I take away. I'm interested in how your work functions as something in between—and for me, it's a poetic experience. It's a collision between material and metaphor.

Sarah: That's really astute. I'm particularly drawn to how the title, [Occasional Work and the Seven Walks](#) inverts the temporal relationship of work and walk. Suddenly work is the occasional and walk is the primary activity of the office. [C-010106](#) also inverts temporal relationships, constantly recentering the relative motion of moving parts. The bridge shifts in response to a passerby, the person responds to sunlight's reflection, the reflection warms the bridge surface and shifts the position of the glass, and so on.

Elizabeth: Something I've noticed is that there's a kind of specificity to the work. When you mentioned [Eileen Gray](#), I think of her work as being materially oriented, very beautifully detailed, and specific. I'm thinking not only of her architectural work, but also of her furniture. There's also a dreamlike quality to it, a sort of fantasy, where it oscillates between very real, tangible detail, but also the incredibly experiential. And the same is true in Lina Bo Bardi's work at the scale of the city, at a much larger scale. It also has this sort of fantasy, questioning what is exactly real, what's the frame of reference, or what's my frame of reference relative to this piece. Where am I, relative to the piece and in the world? Where do I exist in this moment, with this, in this place?

These are some of the things that I thought about when I was on the site with your work. Where am I relative to these buildings that are surrounding us, that are surrounding me? Where am I in space? I'm not grounded, I'm not on the ground, I'm on a bridge, I'm elevated in space—floating.

All of those questions came to mind in a personal experience with the hyper-real and psychological, like experiencing wandering and emplacement relative to the hyper, all the while looking at how the piece was constructed, and the very, very slight tolerances that were necessary for it to work. I found that oscillation to be incredibly profound and interesting, and something that architects and architecture students try to articulate.

These things are seemingly opposed, but are very much in harmony. So, I wonder if that resonates with you and your work. Or maybe not, but it's what I experienced while I was there.

Sarah: I love how you're describing both Gray and Bo Bardi - I would never have thought about it quite like that. In both of their work, there is a tactile immediacy which shapes the experience of a situation, which radiates outward into a designed, orchestrated field.

I think what you're describing—an oscillation in locating oneself in relation to the world—is very much at the core of what I'm interested in. The last two years have been an exciting time creatively because it allowed me to register what is most immediate. I try to keep things close to hand. The more I can physically manipulate, touch, and absorb, the more I understand what I'm doing, even if what I'm working on ultimately operates beyond the range of my perception.

[C-010106](#) is a singular example of this change in my working process. It required virtual coordination with a large team. It is embedded in a building project that was far greater in scale than any I had ever engaged with. The timeline was much longer. I was able to address this distance by asking: what is that detail, how close and intimate can I make it, can I model it at a 1:1 scale in the studio, can we touch it? The project has developed in this way from the beginning; it's kept everything very focused. It's very much what I

hope would happen in the viewers' encounter with the work – a reorientation of self within a much greater field.

Sarah: It's such a helpful way for me to think about this piece because as I said, it is so different from previous work. Everything I'd done previously occupied interior or interior/exterior space. Here it is all exterior: there's no stable horizon defining the field of vision, no threshold demarcating in and out. Creating intimacy within the scale of a city or campus was critical to the success of this work.

Elizabeth: Actually, it's interesting you bring this up, that you mention the horizon, because as we went up and then down the stairs, I was thinking about that—about how the horizon was changing with every step, that I was going into this other realm as I moved up and down. And then I turned ninety degrees and found myself in a new axial relationship to the space that existed between the buildings. I wondered about that axial relationship, and whether it was important to you that it exists.

It made me curious about the role of your piece in its physical context, how it affects this particular place, and how we understand that place now. You talked about a kind of generic-ness and I'm really interested in that; I like the idea of generic place and think that's fascinating because it's not often how we think about the built environment.

I also wonder how your work will influence the way we perceive the larger existing space. With the axial relationship emphasized in a way that it wasn't before, other spaces come to life. We might not have been aware of them and of the horizon as we move up and down and across the bridge. I'll have to go back to your work again and again to see how I experience it over time, especially after the first time of being there which is always a unique experience. I find that interesting and I'll be curious if my students notice it as well, or what they notice.

Sarah: These axial relations are fascinating and I find that they're reflected in our daily tools. The design process for [C-010106](#) required constant back and forth between the physical mockup and the 3d cad model. When navigating 3d software, the model is displayed in four view-ports. Each viewport has a different relationship to the horizon. For example, in the plan view, there is no representation of the horizon, while in the elevation viewports, the horizon is static. The software is unable to dynamically reflect the relationship between the moving body and the shifting horizon. Something as simple as walking up a set of stairs, or walking up a hill, always contains a beautiful flux. This embodied relationship to the world is the one thing that the digital model is always chasing after.

I love the fact that my work makes people aware of a changing horizon.

Teresa: I have one more question: what are your thoughts about misuse of the work? And what does that look like?

Andrée: To extend that line of thinking, I remember some time ago we talked about emergency responses, and risk, and we had a helpful conversation about experimentation in your work and in art practice. I'm curious if you might comment upon that again.

Sarah: I would just ask the question, what does use mean? [Aldo van Eyck](#), the Dutch designer of post-World War II playgrounds, was a big fan of the sandbox. The sandbox has so many open-ended possibilities. What does it mean to misuse the sandbox? I am fascinated by the proposition that the urban environment poses all sorts of permutations for use. It's my hope that [C-010106](#) invites experimentation with public boundaries and expands our awareness of the actions of others.