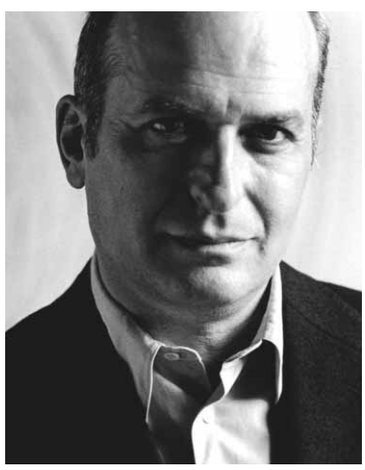
Jonathan Woolf

The thickness of paint



'the project eschews questions about materials'

A photograph by Robert Polidori, of a room within the city of Petra, shows a pristine cubic volume hewn out of the rock. The nature of the stone reveals different textural and figural qualities of the material when it becomes a floor, a wall or a ceiling. There is no need to 'put' the building together, to assemble it, because it is already exists. This, then, is the fantasy of the architect, to sculpt from a single substance that is both structure and surface, with the only remaining questions pertaining to shape and smoothness.

Another photograph is of an installation by Jasper Morrison at the DAAD Gallery, Berlin, in 1988 entitled 'Some New Items for the Home, part I'. Three plywood walls, each animated by product designs and graphics, define a 'room'. Indeed the walls are not 'real', in the sense that they are neither very solid nor substantial, but rather they 'speak' of a wall and their all-over woodiness lends character to this ambiguous abstraction.

Though the two examples are quite different nevertheless they rhyme, both display an orthogonal emphasis and both are spaces enclosed by a single continuous material (that may or may not be very substantial).

It is somewhere between these two poles that the architect operates. The architect orchestrates materials together in a way that has coherence, both formally and materially (and with materials that are becoming ever thinner). Of course what sets conventional architectural production apart from say theatre and set design is that durability of its construction, its *firmitas*. For the architect, where previously the question of how thick a material would need to be might be made based on its availability, with a few notable exceptions, this is not how the majority of building projects are now determined.

In Lucio Fontana's painting *Concetto Spaziale * Attesa* (1964–65), the canvas is revealed as a piece of fabric stretched over a wooden frame, a construction requiring a cavity behind in order to sustain a taut flat surface. The bald fabric's physical reaction to being cut is the work itself. For the architect, plasterboard is the equivalent of canvas, feeling suitably solid at 12.5 mm thick as long it is continuously supported at 600 mm centres. This simple condition is the basis of the majority of interior constructions throughout the developed world. But it is the paint (or paper) finally applied that completes the illusion, denying the plasterboard its material quality.

With Brick Leaf House (2003) our formal and material aspiration sought out a feeling of apparent depth and solidity by using everyday conventional construction techniques and materials of thinness; exterior cavity brick walling to a steel frame; dry-lined metal stud internal partitions and ceilings. The hand-made textural brick was selected to rhyme in colour and texture with the tree bark that dominates the surrounding territory. Internally the walls and ceilings were kept continuously flat and unbroken so that solidity is implied formally rather than materially.

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A concealed steel frame enables generous ground floor spaces ...

'solidity is implied formally rather than materially''



... and a focus on spatial relationships

In the project Painted House, two 1940s suburban London semi-detached houses are transformed into a single house for an extended family of eleven people. The practice of combining dwellings in this fashion is commonplace in some communities in the UK, although largely on an ad hoc basis and seldom from an architectural standpoint. The house is shared by two brothers, their young families and their grandparents.

Suburban houses of this period are characterised by endless extensions and changes by their owners, the result an agglomeration of rooms and details built sequentially without formal coherence. The interiors are something else again and, in a world where the choice of, and access to, so many materials far exceeds our needs, the result is rarely without a generous dose of cheesiness.

In this house almost all of the interior surfaces, walls, ceiling, floors and joinery are either painted or laminated to match paint. This lends the conventional shaped volumes an abstract character. This is not a new phenomenon. The Georgians used

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paint meticulously to define a range of atmospheres that united several different materials within an 'over-all' (or 'all over') finish.

The exterior of the old building has been over-clad with insulation, the rear and side finished with a layer of render. The facade is faced with brick slips, presenting a clearly defined face towards the street, a look which is emphasised by the original window openings, which are retained to maintain the ordinary everyday feel of the traditional suburban semi. Along the sides, and to the rear of the building, however, the new openings become more expansive.

The building works within the footprint of the original properties, both of which had been extended previously at the rear and sides of the plot. The new project extrudes these up to two floors and makes an inhabited loft within a new roof shell. A steel frame has been inserted at ground level to achieve generously proportioned social spaces on the ground floor, which are of a scale in keeping with the size of this extended family unit, and include recreation and study spaces for the children, a large kitchen, eating and living area with large sliding windows opening onto the rear garden. The ground floor also houses accommodation for the elderly grandparents in a position that reflects their place at the heart of the family unit. The project eschews questions about materials, focusing instead on exploring the spatial relationships offered by such an organisational programme.

Jonathan Woolf established his practice in 1990; their award-winning Brick Leaf House in Hampstead was the subject of an interview in **arq** *7.2. Jonathan Woolf has taught throughout the UK and mainland Europe, most recently as a guest professor at the Accademia di Architettura in Mendrisio, Switzerland*

Photographs by David Grandorge, author photograph by Chris Howgate



Conventional, shaped volumes …

'the choice of so many materials far exceeds our needs'



… are lent an abstract quality

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