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To Miss the Desert: Architecture, Site and Writing

Jane Rendell

A hot tent, the swathes of sheet are close enough to make me sweat. I rush headlong into the redness, with sultry breath and a swollen tongue. Down and down, round and round ... swirling in the shallows. The waves rise up and over me. I sink into a world beneath the sand. Towards me, staggering, comes a soldier, left, right, left, right ... I open my eyes. I am in a palace of lilac silk, a cool object is on my chest and something metal in my mouth. A smooth brown hand holds mine.

In my own architectural design research, as a spatial writer and critic, I have suggested that, with his/her responsibility to convey an experience of the work to another audience, the critic occupies a discrete position as mediator and that his or her situatedness conditions the performance of his/her interpretative role.¹ I have described this form of situated criticism as 'site-writing', arguing that the location of the critic with respect to his/her object of study or subject matter is a determining factor in the construction of a critical interpretative position.

Site-writing questions the terms of reference that relate the critic to the work positioned 'under' critique, and instead proposes alternative positions, so functioning as a mode of practice in its own right. This is an active writing, which enacts its interpretative function, aiming to perform the spatial qualities of an artwork or piece of architecture through textual and spatial strategies, reconfiguring the sites between critic and work, essay and reader, as an 'architecture' of criticism.² Here site-writing operates as a form of architectural design research exploring how architectural processes of structuring and detailing spaces can work through textual media, offering new insights into what architecture is and might be.

To Miss the Desert³

Around the Centre

Surrounding her house is a moat of flints with furrows running through it at regular intervals like a ploughed field. When you run up and down these slopes, you can lose your footing and slip, and that is when you know the sharp-looking stones really can cut your knees. Still it is safer here than beyond the walls in the waste-ground of dry bushes and stinging insects, where hyenas cry in the night.

A hallway forms the centre of the house. It has a tiled floor, hard and shiny, at night she comes here to catch insects. Many creatures skulk across it, ants and spiders, and some more sinister, whose names she does not yet know. But as long as she is careful to catch them under her glass jar with its smooth edge, the one that meets the marble without making any gaps, she is safe to sit and watch the trapped insects inside.

14 Floor Finishes

Location G6

Lay new flooring 300 mm × 300 mm terracotta unglazed tiles with sandstone colour grout 10 mm wide joints. All tiles to be laid out from centre line.

Finished floor level to match G5.

A small pig and a spider; the tin roof drums with yet more rain. The rains have come early this year, and they are heavy. She lies tucked up in bed, reading about Charlotte and her web. Her tummy aches. It is swollen, a bit yellow, and worse still, it sticks out. Today she has had her tenth injection, thankfully the final one. Each time the fat needle went into her it made another mark, making a circle around her tummy button, first at mid-day, then at six o'clock, then at three o'clock, then at nine o'clock, and then all the way around again, until she felt bruised and sore.

Big injections had been talked about ever since Bobby the dog got a tick on the rim of his eye. The tick would not come free, not even with a burnt match and ghee. Poor Bobby, with his sad eyes and velvet brown ears, got sicker and sicker. He lay on his side in the shade, panting, his ribs heaving in and out. Sometimes his tummy shook. Finally, he was taken away, to the vets, and never came back.

They kept on talking about big injections. No one seemed to know why Bobby had been sick, was it from tick fever or rabies? Tick fever was not a worry, they said, but rabies certainly was. It turned you mad, frothing at the mouth and running screaming from water, until it got you in the end. Everyone agreed it was the vets' fault; they had burnt Bobby's body. Anyone knows that you should keep the head and take a slide from the brain before burning it. Only then, when you look at that slide, can you tell whether or not the dog had rabies.

Had Bobby licked her hands, they wanted to know. They looked at all the scratches. She always had cuts on her hands from stone hunting and mud-pie baking, she told them. Of course Bobby had licked her hands, especially when she tried to comfort him at the end, poor Bobby.

On an Ethiopian airlines plane, a DC3, with their '13 Months of Sunshine' posters, all the way from Addis Ababa, came the special cool box. She knew the route well; it took you past Gondar, Lalibella and the place beginning with D. You could get out there for a bit to play on the grass by the lake. For eating your snack of bread and jam, the stewardess gave you a bright orange cushion.

The cool box was delivered right to her door by the nice Dutch Doctor. It was packed with jars of a plum-coloured syrup and big plastic syringes, 'horse syringes', the Doctor said and laughed. To keep them cold, everything else had to be taken out of the fridge.

I swing back and forth, higher and higher, watching my dark shadow on the dirt. As mid-day approaches, my shadow grows smaller, and then it disappears. Everything is grey but it is not a shade I have seen before. It is not a dull grey, like the light on a cloudy day when shadows cover up the sun, but bright and dazzling, a grey that hurts my eyes. I look up. The sun has disappeared. Instead there is a black hole. Around the centre is a halo of white light.

Along the Edge

The bathroom has a floor of polished marble, black, interwoven with white veins. Perched on the toilet, with her feet dangling off the ground, she traces the white lines with her gaze. She keeps alert for cockroaches, at any time an intruder might crawl through the cracks along the edge of the room and into the blackness.



Nathan Coley's art work 'Black Tent', 'Art in Sacred Places', Portsmouth, 2003. Photography: Nathan Coley and Peter Langdown

Inside her house all the floors are marble, smooth and cool, laid out in careful grids, except for the big golden rug. In the evening when the sun is in the west, the rug glows. At this time of day she likes to follow the intricate patterns with her feet, like paths around a secret garden. But if you dance along the edge of the squares, you must be careful not to fall in, who knows what could lie in wait for you in such an enchanted place.

Our initial proposal is for a one-storey building with a courtyard at the centre and the accommodation along the edge of the site. This means that the building will be fully accessible without the additional cost of a lift and there will be no problems of overlooking. The main entrance leads to a central courtyard, covered and top lit. All the other facilities are to be accessed off this space.

Along one edge of the garden are the homes of two men. Gullum is tall and fair skinned, with light hair and green eyes; and Kareem shorter, stockier, darker. They have fought each other in the past, and will again when the Soviets come to Kabul, and then again, when her own people search the Hindu Kush to wipe out all evil. But for now, there is no fighting, once the sun has gone down, they sit and eat together.

On weekday mornings she has to wait by the gate for the yellow school bus. She goes to a Catholic school, but the Italian Priest who teaches her has not noticed yet that she never reads the bible. They call him a real revolutionary, a man who fights for the people of Afghanistan. On days when she does not have to go to school, she swims in the streams of the Hindu Kush, looks at blue pots in Istalif, wooden chests in Peshawar, plastic boots in the Kabul bazaar, and one day, she goes south, to visit Kareem's home.

He is a man with property: land and wives. Inside the walls of his house are sunlit orchards full of dark purple fruit. Among the trees his wives sit. Dressed in shades of red, some of the women have covered their faces, others have painted their toes nails pink. From a distance, the women watch them arrive, disappearing inside as they draw closer.

The guests are taken upstairs to a long veranda overlooking the garden. The only furniture here is the carpet laid out in a long line down the middle of the room. Men in turbans sit cross-legged along the edge and eat from the dishes laid out in front of them. They are invited to sit down and eat—the only women—her mother, her sister, and herself.

After the meal, as they walk back down through the dark house to leave, she sees a pair of eyes watching her from behind a screen. The eyes belong to a girl, a girl with the hands of a woman, a woman who glints with silver. Later she learns that this is Kareem's youngest wife, once a nomad, who carries her wealth in the jewels on her fingers.

My own dress is set with tiny mirrors and a handsome square of embroidery at the front. It is hard work to get on, with no fastenings and a fabric so thin it could rip. In this dress I feel just like all the other Afghan girls. Except that they wear their dresses a bit softer, sometimes black. I wonder whether it is to match the black around the edges of their eyes.

At the Threshold

A hot tent, the swathes of sheet are close enough to make me sweat. I rush headlong into the redness, with sultry breath and a swollen

tongue. Down and down, round and round ... swirling in the shallows. The waves rise up and over me. I sink into a world beneath the sand. Towards me, staggering, comes a soldier, left, right, left, right ... I open my eyes. I am in a palace of lilac silk, a cool object is on my chest and something metal in my mouth. A smooth brown hand holds mine.

Her mother tells her a story of how she taught the Sheik's niece English. She was allowed to go inside the harem, and saw that underneath their burqas the women wore make up and perfume. For her labours, she was offered a gift. She asked for a gold leaf burqa, the costume only the wives of the sheik can wear.

Her mother's labour is not easy; she refuses to come out. Her mother walks the dunes along the creek, back and forth, past the apartment block where she lives, but still she waits inside, for a night and a day. The chance of infection is high. There is no glass in the hospital windows. A caesarian section might kill them both, one of them for sure, certainly her mother if she turns out to be carrying a son.

Fortunately there is a woman who is willing to take a chance. On the second night of her mother's labour, the hospital is almost empty; everyone who can has gone, to feast, to break the fast. A nurse runs a drip to encourage her out. But she holds her ground. The nurse turns the drip up. Still she refuses to budge. The drip is turned up again, faster, until she has no choice but to leave her warm waters and enter the world. For her entrance, and her mother's bother, the sheik sends his apologies. «Sorry», he said, «so sorry it isn't a boy». For a boy he would have sent a watch, but for the girl, a tiny gold coffee pot on a gold chain.

14 Floor Finishes

Location L5 and G5

Forbo Nairn lino sheeting 1.5 mm to be laid on 6mm wbp ply sub floor.

Ply and lino to run under appliances and around kitchen units.

Colour tba by client.

Aluminium threshold at junction

with G2, G6 and L1.

Born on the eve of the haj, I am a hajia. I will never have to make the journey to Mecca.

In the Middle

Two concrete paths lead away from the gate, with a long line of zenias in the middle. A small girl in an orange dress comes here often in her search for special stone. Before she crouches down to pick one out, she checks for scorpions.

On the window sill is a row of large tins that have once contained milk powder. Now they hold a collection of carefully chosen and prized items. She takes her stones out and covers them in water so that they glisten. Then she sorts them according to their colour. Her favourites form the most important group, seven in number, one for each colour of the rainbow. She puts them in a safe place, on a small piece of cloth on the table next to her bed. On certain days she takes the stones out into the garden and lays them on a soft patch in the rough grass. Right in the middle she places the violet one. Put right there, it will bring her luck when looking for four-leafed clovers.

She has been told to always shake her shoes out before putting them on, in case a scorpion might be hiding in the toes. And she must make sure to check for them too beneath the ground sheet of



Nathan Coley's art work 'Black Tent', 'Art in Sacred Places', Portsmouth, 2003. Photography: Nathan Coley and Peter Langdown

tents. Scorpions like nothing better than a warm dark place to nest.

Once when she was small, she and her mother went to camp with her father as he checked wells. They slept in a tent, with their daughter between them. Later as they broke camp, under the ground sheet, right in the middle, a large yellow scorpion was found.

They say the way to make a scorpion suffer is to build a circle of fire, place the insect in the middle and watch the poor thing sting itself to death.

There is an option of making a partition in the middle, between the crèche and the café, a flexible one. The partition we have suggested would be half-hour fire resisting and provide equivalent acoustic separation to that of a standard brick wall.

One hot day, she takes the lids off the tins, and pours out her stones over the floor. There is a scuttling sound. She stands firm and watches; in the warm moist interior of the tins, a family of yellow scorpions has hatched and is coming to the surface. She screams. Kareem comes running. He kills each scorpion calmly with the bare of his heel. She hates camping, almost as much as she hates churches. She finds them both boring. But the soft black of a Bedouin tent, that is different...

It is a scorching hot day in San Francisco. Anyone with any sense is on a rooftop or in a park. Instead I force myself through the modern art collection. The gallery is badly lit; each room is a different shade of grey. They say they are going to renovate soon. I stop at another tedious canvas square. This time it is black. I stare hard. Nothing happens. Then I scrunch up my eyes and look out to the middle distance from between the fringes of my lashes. And remember what it feels like, to miss the desert.

To Miss the Desert was a site-writing written in response to Nathan Coley's 'Black Tent' (2003), curated by Gavin Wade.⁴ Black Tent had developed out of Coley's interest in sanctuaries in general, but particularly the evocative and precise description of the construction of the tabernacle given in the bible.⁵ Wade had read a piece of my writing, where I questioned whether it was possible to 'write architecture' rather than to 'write about architecture' and so he asked me to 'write a tabernacle'. I felt that the text in the bible had already written the tabernacle, so I decided to write Black Tent.

Black Tent consisted of a flexible structure, a number of steel-framed panels with black fabric screens stretched across them, and smaller 'windows' inserted into them. Black Tent moved to five sites in Portsmouth reconfiguring itself for each location. My essay echoed aspects of Black Tent; each of its five sections was composed around a different spatial boundary condition, such as 'around the edge'. Yet in order to critique Coley's choice of sanctuary as a specifically religious and Judaeo-Christian one, my choice of spatial motif was the secular sanctuary of home.⁶ Like the squares, the voice of my text was two-sided, setting up a dynamic between private and public sanctuary. One remembered a childhood spent in various nomadic cultures in the Middle East. The other adopted a more professional tone by taking texts from construction specifications I had written when designing contemporary sanctuaries—a series of community buildings for different minority groups.⁷

A couple of years later, for an exhibition entitled 'Spatial Imagination', I selected 'scenes' from this essay and reconfigured them into a text three by four, in response to the grid of a window, where I wrote the word 'purdah' on the glass in black eye liner from Oman. This two-part text installation 'An Embellishment: Purdah'—one part sited in a book and the other in a building—responded to the window as a boundary condition, performing the interface between inside and outside.⁸ Here writing, by responding conceptually, emotionally and spatially, to the conditions offered by the specific site of a window, reconfigured architectural design and space through new conceptualizations of positionality, subjectivity and textuality.

- 1 For a discussion of the politics of spectatorship see for example, Umberto Eco, 'The Poetics of the Open Work', [1962] in Claire Bishop (ed.), *Participation: Documents of Contemporary Art* (London and Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press and the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 2006) pp. 20–40 and Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005) p. 13 and p. 131.
- 2 Jane Rendell, *Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010).
- 3 The following text is based on Jane Rendell, 'To Miss the Desert', Gavin Wade (ed.) Nathan Coley: *Black Tent* (Portsmouth: Art in Sacred Spaces, 2003) pp. 34–43 but radically shortened and reworked.
- 4 Jane Rendell, 'To Miss the Desert', Gavin Wade (ed.) Nathan Coley: *Black Tent* (Portsmouth: Art in Sacred Spaces, 2003) pp. 34–43.
- 5 Nathan Coley's fascination with places of religious worship runs through his practice. An early work, *Fourteen Churches of Münster* (2000), comprises a street plan and the view from a helicopter circling fourteen churches in the city: in the Second World War allied bomber pilots were issued with an order to target them. *The Lamp of Sacrifice, 161 Places of Worship*, Birmingham (2000) and *The Lamp of Sacrifice, 286 Places of Worship*, Edinburgh (2004) consist of cardboard models of all the places of worship in the towns listed in the Yellow Pages, have been argued to express the premise of Coley's work—that architectural forms remain empty contained until socially occupied. See Martin Herbert, 'Nathan Coley, Fruitmarket Gallery Edinburgh', *Art Monthly*, n. 278 (July–August 2004) pp. 35–37, p. 36. More recent projects, such as *There Will Be No Miracles Here* (2006) Mount Stuart, Isle of Bute, question the passivity of architecture especially in current religious conflicts. One part of the exhibition—*Camouflage Mosque, Camouflage Synagogue, Camouflage Church*—comprises three models covered in 'dazzle' camouflage, a technique applied to ships during both World Wars as protection from attack. See Andrea Schlieker, 'Negotiating the Invisible: Nathan Coley at Mount Stuart' at <http://studionathancoley.com/works/camouflage-mosquesynagoguechurch> (accessed 2 September 2012).
- 6 Coley's interest in sanctuaries has been related to their role as places of refuge outside state control. See Nathan Coley, *Urban Sanctuary: A Public Art Work by Nathan Coley* (Glasgow: The Armpit Press, 1997) which comprised a series of interviews with eight people including a policeman and a fen shui practitioner where the artist asked each person what the term sanctuary meant to them and documented their answers.
- 7 Coley's work has examined the representation of architecture through different kinds of media simultaneously, for example, *Minster* (1998) an installation in The Tate Gallery Liverpool, consisted of slide projected images of a non-conformist chapel in Liverpool's Toxteth, a recorded lecture of a guided tour of York Minster and an explanatory pamphlet describing the correct procedure for establishing a tabernacle or portable sanctuary. See Nick Barley (ed.) *Leaving Tracks: Artranspennine98, an International Contemporary Visual Art Exhibition Recorded* (London: August Media Ltd., 1999) pp. 78–81.
- 8 See Jane Rendell, *An Embellishment: Purdah* (2006) *Spatial Imagination*, domoBaal contemporary art, London with an associated catalogue essay Jane Rendell, 'An Embellishment', Peg Rawes and Jane Rendell (eds) *Spatial Imagination* (London: The Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL, 2005) pp. 34–35. See www.spatialimagination.org.uk (accessed 8 July 2008). For a longer discussion of this installation see Jane Rendell, *Site-Writing*, pp. 103–109.