

*This way of speaking, of writing, isn't considered professional. It's not academic and it's personal. It's feminine and it's bad. I'm not going to distance myself from this subject matter to make professional and rather indigestible.*

I Thought About It While Laying on the Floor

Grace Wirzba

I remember trying to explain to my older sister, Johannah, how I loved big spaces with carpet. She seemed to understand, not commiserate, but understand and has often chuckled and nodded when I've referred to it since.

Probably weekly I think of the vast expanse of pink carpet cushioning the floors of the church I grew up in. Steinbach Mennonite Church. I think about sitting underneath the coat racks just off to the right when you came in the East side of the building, past the mailboxes. I was reading a book, one that I got from my Mom's bookshelf. It was a softcover and a dark green with a tree on the front. I gathered little from it as it was pretty heavy theology and not geared towards nine year olds. I often fancied myself intelligent and liked the authority that reading a heavy book brought to me. Or at least carrying it around.

The space of that foyer was filled with light when it was my favourite. The skylights were at the top of the oblique triangular ceiling. Even when the lights were off, in the afternoon they would cast light on the light grey bricks the walls were constructed out of. Those bricks were always an odd claim to fame, I remember everyone saying they had [REAL FOSSILS](#) hidden

inside them. I would stand behind the “welcome centre”, a large wooden alter-like piece of furniture and look and look for those fossils.

The hallways at my high school were carpeted. I realized it when my parents and I took a tour of the school from a bald man a week after we’d moved here. I thought it odd, but comforting. Seemed like a TV show in some way. Like usual.

We went to France when I was in seventh grade. The carpet at my aunt’s mom’s house was incredibly scratchy. Is that a French thing? It was pretty long and beige and seemed just fine, until I sat, knees down, on it in my stretchy terry cloth shorts. We tried to play a game on the carpet, maybe Lego, maybe something more European. I couldn’t really play; the carpet was too prickly.

My parents owned a fabric store and would frequently travel to quilt shows across Manitoba, sometimes further across the Prairies or into Southern Ontario. I’d often have a significant amount of free time to spend in large conference centers and hotel ballrooms. I felt a calmness exploring these winding spaces alone. In one, in Regina, I’d found a small nook quite far from the actual show to read on an uncomfortable chair, the way chairs at conference centers are always uncomfortable. It was a space that didn’t foster lingering or inhabiting for too long, little bursts of sitting, but did not encourage hunkering down. None the less, I hunkered down. Relishing in the time I had alone to doodle and listen to my brand new iPod Nano.

On one trip, with a couple of my closest female friends, we went to Canmore. The four of us went to spend time together, I guess obligatorily to see Lake Louise, which we had all seen before. We played Dutch Blitz on the balcony above the lobby. The hotel, being Canmore, resembled a log cabin. The chairs we sat on were made of shiny, lacquered warm coloured wooden logs and the stairs were the same. We walked in our socks along the short, carpeted hallway to the small table where we played.

Later, on that same trip, we were staying at a new Comfort Inn in North Calgary, it was in a weird new development and had nothing around it but dirt. One friend was sick, barfing and annoyed with us. To give her privacy, the three of us played Dutch Blitz in the lobby. Familiar. This lobby was tiled and colder. We were pretty close to the front door, people arriving from long travels nearby, but I remember laughing a lot.

Playing Dutch Blitz in many church foyers, sitting on the ground with distant cousins to avoid insufferable conversations at family gatherings. But this isn’t about Dutch Blitz.

We wanted to spend the night at the university. Many have I’m sure. We felt particularly radical in doing so, adrenaline and giggling were central to the activity though it was really hardly an extension of how we usually used the space. I remember leaving to get dinner and returning to the space later and it felt different, we were getting ready to “live” here for the night. It’s like you are telling your body to feel comfortable here, even if it isn’t quite sure about it. We slept in W842 on yoga mats and blow up mattresses. We slept for 3 hours before the custodian came in to

clean and we scrambled to appear not sleeping. The smell of that room is ingrained, like toothpaste and something slightly sweet, maybe cherry. Every time I walk into it I think about my best friends and the episode of Friends we watched. And how our giggles would have been probably straight up audible to the tech sitting next door.

There is a transgression of space that occurs in the studio spaces at the University of Lethbridge. The space is meant to be institutional; it is constructed to be fairly uncomfortable and incredibly masculine. It's a modernist concrete structure, and by the nature of modernism, Arthur Erickson was trained to design 'rational' spaces. Hard, rough, bland, symmetrical, balanced, sensible, concrete. It smells stale, but still unidentifiable. The fine arts staircase, the architectural feature that the building rotates and bustles around, is comparable to a Jenga tower, upright and consisting of only geometric rectangles, fitting together seamlessly. The only thing it's missing is the toppling effect. If one shape was missing, it would all fall down. There's an aggression in this, and in the walls, that seeks to make your body just uncomfortable enough to leave soon. Running your fingers along the concrete, tracing the rocks and shards until they feel less intimidating, less stone. More squish, squelch, ooze.

Architecture, in this sense, is usually decidedly regarded as a neutral container, a simple set for our daily rituals. The

gallery walls are painted white to give the illusion of neutrality. But the walls carry memory, sleepiness, loneliness, jokes and sighs. Joel Sanders talks about them. Thinking that we habitually take public spaces for granted but in all actuality, they quietly and decisively participate in manufacturing male subjectivity.<sup>1</sup> Supposedly a politically and emotionally neutral chunk of floor or wall, our public spaces actually construct, deconstruct and guide our habitual activities. Sometimes I think they might roll their eyes at us.

The relationship I hold with the 8<sup>th</sup> floor of the Centre for Fine Arts at the University of Lethbridge is a misbehavior. A disobedience against the distinction between public and private space. I hold an intimate relationship with the space, even though it pushes back against me. Intimacy with public space. Intimacy within public space. Is there something inherently feminine about connecting to this space?

My studio space, my 4x4 foot space tries to push back against my embrace. The concrete wall doesn't hold the tape that I use to stick up a mind map /drawing/polaroid photograph. The spouts and nozzles that jut out of the walls attempt to forbid the way I've 'moved in' to the space as I attempt to stack my belongings around them, engulfing the architectural miscellanies into my collection of things. They become part of my paraphernalia. The small claustrophobic cubicles try really hard to allocate each space to just one individual, simulating an assertion of privatization to the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://joelsandersarchitect.com/stud-architectures-of-masculinity/#fn-1500-4>

production of art work in this space. The cubicle is my supposed 'property' in this public space, property defined by small panels of drywall, boundaries, walls which are closed, fixed and permanent, controlling each threshold.<sup>2</sup> We are each given a small white cubicle, in which we should try create independently. At least that's what the 8' walls communicate to me, that I probably shouldn't look over, under, around or through the wall to talk to my studio mates. It resists the communal. In response, we drilled a hole in the wall. A small 3" round hole, hastily drilled with a bit we plucked from the shop around the corner. It's just big enough that one of us can fit our mouth in while the other rests their ear against it on the opposite side. Then we can communicate, share and tell secrets through the wall that wishes we didn't. Though it seems to have held our attention much longer with being just the right size to flick small items, erasers, pieces of paper, small foam cubes, through it at the other.

My relationship to this rational space is emotional, sentimental, nostalgic and passionate. Days and days, I've returned to this building, its lines of lockers and doors asking me to stay. I've cried in the woodshop. I've made best friends in the print studio. I've shared meals on the concrete floors. I've seen heart break in the hallways. I've heard gossip over the walls. I've drunk beers in the offices. I've napped on the carpet. I've spent far too long sitting on the bathroom floor, gross,

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<sup>2</sup> Jane Randell, <http://www.janerendell.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/undoing.pdf>

trying to gather myself to re-enter that public hubbub. The space has become my home, much more than my parent's house and much more than my roommate's house. There's a wash of squish when I walk down the halls in my socks. I've spent time with these walls and I've spent time with these floors. It's often asked me not to, that nap was less than comfortable and booze demands certificates. Potlucks are forbidden by paperwork and hanging curtains is a fire hazard. It's seemingly radical to want to spend time here; to do the paperwork to spend time here.

The body of work that has come out of this line of thought is reflective of the physical architecture. I reference air ducts and ceiling beams as symbolic stand-ins for the human relationships fostered in this space. It's incredibly squishy. I've silkscreened a series of fabrics in multiple colours, all with the same pattern of the view from the south end of the shop looking towards the metal shop. It's an image made up of the tables, vents, ducts, chairs, lights, floors, and walls that I'm surrounded by each day. Highlighting the tables many a tired student has slumped at, the chairs we've collapsed into and the tools we were often too proud to ask for help with. I printed the pattern onto cotton broadcloth, repeating after each tabletop. Sewn into pillows, duvets, sheets, and sleeping bags, the rigidity of these structures slowly dissolves away. The architecture of this 'masculine' space, a wood shop, is sewn into squishy, soft, domestic, housewares I'd like to wrap myself in. Napping within the woodshop. I clothe the vents.

Now, inserted into a gallery space, we shift again. This duvet sits on my lap as a chat with a friend in the corner of the

gallery. The fabric is abstracted by the folds then enveloping my body, but the hints of duct work and ventilation are reflected in the ceiling of this gallery. The gallery so badly wants to be a white cube, but look up. Tubes, pipes, vents. Look down, a blue, grey, mint paint supposedly to hide dirt, I see scuffs, paint drops from previous installers, and chips in the paint. It has memory in that, quirks in the architecture. An adapted space, that I adapt once again. I spend time here. I talk to it and it really seems to ask me to carpet it. Maybe sofa it. Finish it? Chat with it.

\*Multiple text excerpts in the installation are sourced from Mei-meï Berssenbrugge's *Nest*.

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