

LEAVE THE DOOR AJAR

On the Generosity of Found Space



Blue Flower Texts at NG Building, 212 Madras Street. Image courtesy of Steven Park

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A LOST SOURCE: a memory of reading about an anthropologist who relocated to a city dealing with the aftermath of natural disaster, somewhere in South America, to be in a place where she could come to terms with her own emotional turmoil. At least the heavy tropical humidity could be blamed for a

feeling of suffocation, the disorienting sensation of one's body and the air being too similar in volume.

I moved to Christchurch from Wellington at the end of 2019, escaping a year of sickness and despondency. While the only other place I had lived was at the bottom of the South Island, this was not anything like a homecoming. In fact, Christchurch had always been an unknown shadow in my brain, a strange swampy expanse of carparks and outlet malls. Nonetheless, motivated by an impulse to swap one set of problems for an unfamiliar other, it was where I dumped two suitcases of things and myself, barely, on a squally November day. The appeal of Ōtautahi was, like my unremembered anthropologist's pull to a South American city, rooted in an attraction toward its temporal illogics, which I thought would be a great backdrop for my own unmooring. In her fragmentary essay 'Fifty Minutes,' Moyra Davey writes through the anxieties of experiencing nostalgia in a post-9/11 New York, as to situate the location in a past presupposes a relationship to history that is no longer available. A city that suffers such wreckage can no longer take its permanence for granted.¹ Christchurch's flattened grid affirms that, here too, daydreaming about historical continuity is fraught.

A shared awareness of the built environment has heightened in post-quake Christchurch, growing into the post-post epoch that we have now entered. This tuning-in to what remains of Christchurch's exoskeleton has generated sites for refuge and experimentation, as Jasmine Gallagher writes in [her essay on the Antipodean Gothic](#) for the *Pantograph Punch*:

... in fact, the earthquakes have accentuated what was good about living in Christchurch already. Our CBD had to be demolished, with a subsequent kind of regeneration and reappraisal of the spaces outside and gaps between modern suburban life: the sea, hills, mountains, rivers, gardens, and parks. Meanwhile, from the port, along the train tracks, past the cemeteries, industrial estate, warehouses, and abandoned red zone, to the night-time streets along the East side of the old city centre—this is where the Antipodean Gothic soundtrack of this place that I know has echoed.²

Gallagher reacquaints herself with the city through a personal geography, conceiving areas of town as spaces to be found or happened upon. This sense of exploration echoes Janet Frame's childhood experience of coming-to-know a place, the barren Glenham in Southland, '... overcome by a delicious feeling of discovery, of gratitude, of possession. I knew that this place was entirely *mine*; mine the moss, the creek, the log, the secrecy.'³ Tunnelling through a place and carving out patches made of a bit more magic is a common response to living somewhere isolating or desolate: two things that can

¹ Moyra Davey, 'Fifty Minutes,' in *Index Cards* (London: Fitzcarraldo, 2020), 13.

² Jasmine Gallagher, 'Christchurch, and the heart of the Antipodean Gothic,' <https://www.pantograph-punch.com/posts/christchurch-antipodean-gothic>, 07 December 2015.

³ Janet Frame, *To the Is-land* (Auckland: Hutchinson, 1984), 25-26.

be true for Christchurch. Gallagher describes a possibility for re-enchantment, remaining in spite of hostile monolithic geometries, the steel and glass in much of the architecture that has constituted the Christchurch rebuild. In my wandering in a new environment, I understood that there was a different sensitivity toward space here, and a need to reinscribe the material of rubble. The act of burrowing, exemplified in Gallagher and Frame's writing, produces a labyrinthine architecture that is invisible from above ground, and so too this essay is a kind of excavation or survey, of artistic practices that I have come to know through conversations and friendships that, although diverse, reflect a shared interest in responding to their material reality.

I understood that there was a different sensitivity toward space here, borne from a scarcity of it, and a need to reinscribe the material of rubble.

IN WALTER BENJAMIN'S account of sharing his hotel accommodation with a Buddhist conference, he observed that the doors to every room were ajar, though the building was quiet, as the sect had vowed against closed rooms. Eloise Sweetman, who relays Benjamin's anecdote in her book *Curatorial Feelings*, writes, 'the door ajar can induce encounter based on trust and risk; it acknowledges that there cannot be trust without risk, and vice versa.'⁴ There is a literal parallel available in Christchurch, owing to the streets of hollowed-out façades; in lieu of a door ajar, we might find a door ripped off its hinges, or a gaping second floor with a shadowy rectangle instead of a windowpane. This architectural openness can reconfigure the facts of the built environment into fertile ground for experiences that might otherwise be disruptive or at odds with what is expected within a particular structure. A level of trust and risk is associated with the decision to cross the threshold of an open space, and this negotiation can be both actual and conceptual. In choosing to engage with precarious architecture, there is a certain bodily and sometimes legal risk, but also confidence that whatever might happen inside is worth the payoff.

In her 1976 essay '[The Apotheosis of the Crummy Space.](#)' Nancy Foote noted the tendency of artists participating in the group exhibition, *Rooms*, at the newly available Public School 1 space in New York, towards producing work that could survive its surroundings, rather than relying on them to

⁴ Eloise Sweetman, *Curatorial Feelings* (Rotterdam: Shimmer, 2021), 38-39.

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authenticate it.⁵ I interpret Foote's use of *survive* like a headstone. The immediacy of a building scheduled for demolition is an impetus to make something that will outlast or live on after the supporting structure totally crumbles. In a city like Christchurch, where this kind of dilapidated building still punctuates its streets, to 'co-opt the crumminess; draw upon it; work it into the art,' as Foote writes, can be an act of resistance against making art in and for perfect spaces.⁶

[Paludal](#), a gallery run by Zina Swanson, James Oram and Simon Palenski, began its programming shortly after my arrival in Christchurch. Located around the back of a restaurant, on the corner of two main roads, Paludal made use of a shed-like room that was probably intended as additional storage space for the also-compact kitchen. The second exhibition on Paludal's programme was Sonya Lacey's *Pillows* (2020), which opened four days before the initial COVID lockdown. A moving-image triptych, dedicated to an unseen newspaper employee, *Pillows* compresses footage of a printing factory in South-East Asia—Cambodia, I think—and washed filmic scans of newsprint fragments. Paludal itself only had capacity for about four people, so the overflow into the courtyard was a commotion of kitchen prep, art people, deliveries of vegetables and shellfish, chalk drawings from the kid upstairs, students, and early diners.



Sonya Lacey, *Pillows* (detail), 2020, three channel 16mm film transferred to HD video (no sound). Image courtesy of the artist.

⁵ Nancy Foote, 'The Apotheosis of the Crummy Space,' *Artforum*, October 1976, 30.

⁶ *Ibid.*

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OPPOSITE THE ENTRANCE to the exhibition space was the restaurant's kitchen, and beside that, the door to the chef's first-floor apartment. Inside, a film of somebody (not) at work, sleeping on the job; outside, a restaurant gearing up for their night shift. Proximity is important, and in the near-overlap of these two representations of labour, Paludal, in its quiet adaptability toward the activities surrounding it, refused to divorce its own interests from those who they shared the communal area with. After a little over a year and a half of thoughtful exhibitions, it has closed its doors, dormant while its facilitators search for new premises. For now, Paludal is on hiatus, their name crystallising their ethos, *a. of a marsh*, something absorbent that might sink gently back into where it came from.

My bookshop project, [Blue Flower Texts](#), materialised from an opportunity to utilise the stairwell [of the NG Building at 212 Madras St](#), the last of the Edwardian warehouses that characterised Christchurch's commercial architecture during the early 1900s. Any structural damage that the building sustained during the earthquakes was repaired swiftly, and as one of the first buildings to reopen in the CBD, the NG Building was able to host design firms, artists' studios, hair salons, NG Boutique, and significantly, the Christchurch Art Gallery for a period of time. Unfortunately, the building was situated on land intended for the new sports stadium, and at the beginning of this year, the owners were notified that the Crown intended to take acquisition and pull it down to begin work on the consented plans. The ensuing legal battle created an interim window when Blue Flower was able to occupy the stairs that led to upstairs tenancies, rent-free and with the knowledge that this arrangement would only last for a finite amount of time.

The adjacent building remained structurally damaged from the earthquakes, and was supported by shipping containers, a mainstay of Christchurch's recent built environment, which also obscured the entrance to the building. It was inside this corridor of containers, in a thoroughfare of wooden stairs, that Blue Flower was able to exist. On Sundays, my boyfriend and I would move our kitchen table and cardboard boxes of books from our garage into his truck and then into the stairwell. There, rushed every time, I would unpack and sort the publications into piles, moving in for a few hours via what was effectively a cantilevered bookshelf. The stairwell space itself still preserved the histories of organisations that had shared its walls in other eras. A sliding in-out board records the availability of Musical Instrument Repairs, Somewhere in Time studio, River S. Holloway, Bains Warehouse Ltd and so on. Sometimes, I slid the peg to IN, and imagined a workshop still above me, restringing violins and cellos.

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THE NG BUILDING has been saved, on [the condition that it will be physically relocated two blocks down the street](#), preparations for which are already underway. Once this process began, a huge feat of engineering, the tenants and me—a clinger-on—had to vacate. The recognition that a project will be short-lived is an invigorating force, because it means new ideas can be tested quickly and without the deterrence of commitment. There is less trepidation toward beginning something and knowing that it will not last forever. This should not equate to a lack of criticality or reflection; the spate of local council initiatives for revitalising the CBD has offered ample space to practice critique toward short-term projects. For this sweet, temporary time though, I am optimistic that Blue Flower was a surprising endeavour, subverting how commercial space is commonly systematised in New Zealand—segmented into formal and neat tenancies—and a push against the ceaseless encroachment of the property market. Instead of empty space, Blue Flower reconfigured a thoroughfare into a makeshift shop and meeting place for local artists, writers, friends, and a slight but pleasant obstacle for those needing to get upstairs on the weekend. Renewed interest in the NG Building from the coverage of its uncertain future meant that people who were just passing by to look at the building happened upon a tiny bookshop as well.

This is not to say that there were no opponents to the building's preservation. Beneath any news article on the fate of the building and the progress of the stadium seethed a comments section adamant on the priority of the stadium asserting that the NG Building was an unsound eyesore. Maybe they were not all wrong. In the appeal of liminal space, there can also be an unsubstantiated romanticism of conditions that are unreasonably bad, and this is especially pertinent when many residents are dealing with ongoing EQC claims. Nonetheless, occupying architecture that would ordinarily be described as precarious, ignored, or abandoned exemplifies Sweetman's equation of risk and trust. To put bodies in a discarded space reactivates that site and refuses the modernist urban mandate that architecture organises organisms. In fact, the more disused and worn that an architecture is, the more that it might reflect the precarity of our own lived experiences.

In their performance, *HIVE* (2019), at the neo-gothic Christchurch Arts Centre, developed by Julia Harvie and Stuart Lloyd-Harris, dancers Josie Archer, Kosta Bogoievski, and Sarah Elsworth

infiltrated its cordoned-off renovation zones. Distributing hi-vis and headlights to their audience, the performance seeped into the wings that were at least partially refurbished already, taking a tour of the stacks of heritage material— floorboards, tiles, wooden beams— salvaged and waiting to be reappropriated in forthcoming building work. The amalgamation of heritage and ruin often produces a dystopian sensation. Erin Harrington [writes in her review of the performance](#), ‘I am taken by the way that [Bogoievski’s] initially descriptive account of how this space might soon look— rococo columns, flying buttresses, images of the best of New Zealand— becomes at first breathless, and then thrashing and frenzied. The beautiful trappings of the past become a fetish.’⁷ Refusing that a construction site had to be out of bounds for a general public, *HIVE* was able to deploy the historical inconsistency of a heritage building in the midst of restoration.



HIVE, a performance held in an unfinished section of the restored Arts Centre, Christchurch, September 2019. Image courtesy of Stuart Lloyd-Harris.

THERE IS A spookiness to found space and matter, because it comes with its own energy. As in the conciliation of risk and trust when entering a physical space that is structurally compromised, it is an active decision to work with found material. Found spaces require a tuning-in— that is, arriving at a place and listening to what it might have to offer. This attention to the physical reality of a building, street, or local pub, and where its histories might be able to fill your own gaps is a way of thinking that goes beyond actual architectures. I guess because the people I know in Ōtautahi had a coming-of-

⁷ Erin Harrington, ‘Hive,’ <https://www.theatreview.org.nz/reviews/review.php?id=11881>, 7 September 2019.

age when you had to wedge your way into space, rather than go somewhere pre-existing, mobilising disintegrating space has been built into the collective consciousness, a process of taking familiar fragments and reimagining how they might function in an altered edition of the city. In the surprise and obscurity of a bookshop in the slightly damp stairwell of a falling down building or a now-peripatetic gallery, perhaps hard-to-find might imply a lack of adherence to what is expected of the surroundings.

I want to return to Benjamin, by way of his unfinished *Arcades Project*, an ode to the mystical connecting corridors of Paris, disappearing, at least partially, under the Haussmannisation of the city. Benjamin wrote, ‘So today a few arcades still preserve, in dazzling light and shadowy corners, a past become space.’⁸ His description of the arcades conveys their anachronistic quality in a version of Paris where broad new avenues are cracking the city wide. It is bitter that the arcades that Benjamin laments are materially similar to the type of architecture that has usurped the grimy and forgotten space here, in Ōtautahi. Where his complexes of iron and glass accommodated vendors and the flâneurs of Paris, my entry to this glassy cityscape is watching it catch the golden bar of light that falls from the Nor’west arch.

8. Walter Benjamin, ‘Arcades,’ in *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press), 871.

About the Author

Jane Wallace is an arts writer living in the port town of Lyttelton. She runs a bookshop project, Blue Flower Texts, based for the moment in Ōtautahi proper. Jane completed her BA (Honours) in Art History at Victoria University of Wellington. Her research is mostly concerned with collective memory and overlooked histories.

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