New craft in old spaces: artist-designed rooms at Toronto's Gladstone Hotel

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In his collection of polemical essays, *Design and Crime*, Hal Foster invokes the spectre of Viennese architect Adolf Loos, whose infamous diatribe 'Ornament and Crime' (1908) attacked Art Nouveau and endorsed modernism's cult of pure and undecorated form. One hundred years later, Foster believes Loos's critique has new resonance in terms of its analysis of 'the penetration of design in everyday life' (Foster, 2002, p. xiii). Citing designers ranging from Bruce Mau to Frank Gehry as negative examples, Foster bemoans the degree to which contemporary design conflates consumer culture and global capitalism into a new 'political economy'. Pointing to what he sees as the total ascendancy of design in a world dominated by commercial interests, Foster raises valid concerns about style trumping substance and critical reflection lost in a sea of 'smooth consumer objects that need to be demystified' (Kingwell, 2001, p. 75). Why his critique might matter to those interested in the future and wellbeing of craft practice is that, increasingly, design culture is advocated as a necessary corrective to the nostalgic and regressive tendencies some attribute to contemporary studio craft (Clark, 2003, p. 378), or the lack of appropriate design education in the teaching of craft that results in objects failing in the marketplace (Perivoliotis, 2004). It is worth asking to what degree design process and practice can reinvigorate contemporary craft and at what cost. To narrow the focus of this admittedly broad topic, my paper will examine a specific case: renovations of the Gladstone Hotel in Toronto, Ontario, in which project manager Christina Zeidler commissioned artists, designers and makers of fine craft to renovate guest rooms in the hotel. I will focus on several contributors whose projects achieved satisfying results within parameters claimed by design, fine art and craft. I will explore Foster's critique, considering some implications that 'the new political economy of design' might have for definitions of public space, and I will evaluate contemporary craft's contributions to public design.

In the world of interior design, *Gesamkunstwerk*, or 'total work of art', implies that a synthesising design aesthetic has been applied to every aspect of a project. In 'Ornament and Crime', Loos satirises a man for whom an Art Nouveau designer designed everything – walls, furniture, ashtrays and light switches – in order to achieve a 'symphony of colors, complete in itself'. Rather than liberating the client, this 'triumphant overcoming of limits' rendered him nothing but a 'corpse', devoid of 'future living and striving, developing and desiring' (quoted in Foster, 2002, pp. 14–15). In the words of contemporary social critic, Karl Kraus, such all-embracing design left no 'running room' for culture (ibid., p. 15).

Foster contends that Loos's argument has renewed resonance, but now the stakes are higher. Today everything is design: advertising, architecture, clothing, genetic material and plastic surgery – even art itself is served up as yet one more frontier for the expanding empire of total design (ibid., p. 18). The tag-line to Bruce Mau's exhibition *Massive Change* proclaims: 'It's not about the world of design, it's about the design of the world' (Marshall, 2005, p. 23). Foster mocks Mau's self-congratulatory *Life Style* as a 'folding of the "examined life" into the "designed life" ' (Foster, 2002, p. 23). Declaring contemporary design 'part of a greater revenge of capitalism on postmodernism … a primary agent that folds us back into the near-total system of … consumerism' (ibid., p. 25), Foster is hardly alone in his censure (Kingwell, 2001; Jamieson, 2005; Marshall, 2005). Many resist the rhetoric and overly simplified approach to complex issues promoted by such behemoths as *Massive Change*, even as they credit certain of its projects with merit. To equate all contemporary design with Mau and company is to misrepresent the discipline and its practitioners, many of whom historically have recognised the close relationship between progressive, democratic or utopian goals and the design of everyday things (Kingwell, 2001, p. 74). As design technologies become more accessible to artists and makers, more are engaging with areas of industry once considered antithetical to their interests. Furthermore, as design theorists increasingly conceptualise their field as 'a provocation to the audience to construct meaning, consider new ideas, and reconsider preconceptions', the remit of design itself is transforming (McCoy and McCoy, 1990, p. 16). In this new 'expanded' field, both craft and design are finding 'running room' to play.

The Gladstone Hotel renovation project

In 2004, Christina Zeidler, manager of the Gladstone Hotel in Toronto, commissioned artists, designers and makers to decorate hotel guest rooms. Recently, designer 'boutique' hotels have become extremely popular with wealthy travellers. These establishments trade in soothing interiors, upmarket accessories, designer linens and aromatherapy, presenting ready examples of

Bruce Mau's 'expanding empire of total design'. Countering this trend, Zeidler champions the social history of the hotel, which has long served a community of artists, designers, musicians, galleries and small shops. The artist-designed hotel room is not a new concept, and other hotels such as the Dominion Hotel in Vancouver, British Columbia, have embarked on similar projects. The Gladstone project is notable for the thoroughness of its conception and the degree to which organisers support those who completed designs. This integration and philosophical framework raise the project to the level of a curatorial intervention into public art.

As an intervention, Zeidler's project might be located at the forefront of new thinking about curating and displaying craft. Historically, the display of craft objects has followed models based either on retail, with objects crowded onto shelves and promoted for their commercial appeal, or on the fine arts, in which the 'white cube' approach – isolated objects on plinths in sterile galleries – is adopted as a paragon for its imputed status and prestige (Veiteberg, 2004). Neither suits the intrinsically multi-sensory and often domestic or functional nature of most crafted objects. As Australian curator Robert Cook writes:

> And so it is that I'm self-destructively, and unprofessionally, troubled by the very idea and the very actuality of craft exhibitions that have been inherited from some of the more dubious back alleys of the art world. I'm not at all convinced that, as currently conceived, they're the right model to be the zone of public interface between maker, object and handler/wearer/viewer. So, though I love craft – am passionately excited about the intricately sophisticated ways it speaks about the body, and all the social meanings that spiral out from these – whenever I find myself in a public gallery (replete with text panels, labels, etc.), this excitement seems to ebb away (Cook, 2002, pp. 24–5).

Cook favours the model of 'shopping', in which a final purchase consummates consumer and object interaction. However, mindful of dangers posed by the essentially solitary, non-social nature of shopping, he proposes exhibitions that comprise 'a set of explorations and interchanges … actively framed by the building itself … where makers are thinking and producing across genres and species distinctions' (ibid., p. 29). The guiding metaphor of these activities would be 'play, which in turn aims to connect the body to the space, and to the social orders that produce it' (ibid.). Artist-designed hotel rooms fit this model of connecting body and space within the purview of architecture. Conceiving of their projects as a totality, the artist/designers go well beyond merely situating artworks in a room; given that the rooms must function for guests, the interiors face restrictions not applicable to installation art. Artist-designed rooms thus constitute a form of hybrid practice addressing facture, function, concept, space and display.

Hotels lend themselves to such projects, providing ready subjects for travel literature, fashionable residences for rock stars and artists, locations for exhibitions and performances and ciphers of the anonymity and alienation

13.1   The Gladstone Hotel, Toronto, Canada. Photo: Cat O'Neil

of modern culture. A recent issue of *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* devoted to hotels describes them as 'complex site[s] of social and cultural production characterized by a host of competing ideas and ideologies … at once commercial and domestic, egalitarian and restrictive, and the site of both production and consumption' (Berger, 2005, p. 6).

These complexities pervade the Gladstone renovation project. The Gladstone, located in Parkdale, is the oldest continuously operating hotel in Toronto (Fig. 13.1). Built in 1889 by architect George Miller, the Gladstone accommodated travellers from the Canadian National Railway (CNR), the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) and the Grand Trunk and also those visiting the nearby *Canadian National Exhibition*. Stylistically, it is an example of 'Richardsonian Romanesque', a style named for the influential architect

Henry Hobson Richardson (1838–86) and used widely in North America for train stations, hotels and other public buildings. Characterised by rough-cut stone and brick, arched windows and flamboyant mouldings, the Gladstone epitomises the style. Interestingly, the hotel houses the only remaining hand-operated lift still in use in Toronto. The hotel comprises several large public rooms on the main floor; a second floor graced with wide hallways and high ceilings; a balcony opening onto the hotel's main entrance and a series of flexible-use spaces. The second, third and fourth floors contain a total of 52 rooms and suites accessed by a grand staircase (Gladstone Hotel, n.d.).

Over time, the hotel fell into disrepair, yet it remained an important cultural landmark for artists, musicians and lower-income residents who called Parkdale home. The building was purchased in 2002 by the Zeidler family who committed themselves to restoring the building's original glory through a series of major renovation projects begun in 2005. By redeveloping the hotel's accommodations and initiating a number of cultural events, the family sought to preserve an important part of Toronto's architectural heritage. Eberhard Zeidler, senior partner in Zeidler Partnership Architects, trained at the Bauhaus in Weimar and elsewhere prior to coming to Canada in 1951 (Zeidler Partnership Architects, n.d.). The recipient of numerous awards and an Officer of the Order of Canada, Zeidler follows a philosophy rooted in Jane Jacobs's commitment to contemporary urbanism. This ethos is carried forward in family projects such as Toronto's 401 Richmond, a cultural and commercial centre catering to artists, designers, galleries and small businesses, and the Gladstone project. The websites for both these projects espouse the family's vision that endorses mixed-use tenants, new uses for old buildings, environmentally friendly solutions and community support (401 Richmond, n.d.; Gladstone Hotel, n.d.).

The initial proposal was to renovate 15 guest rooms, a number that was expanded eventually to 37. The publicly circulated call and submission process detailed rigorous specifications: the décor had to operate on a practical level – it had to be sanitary, easy to maintain, functional and cost-effective. Thematic and conceptual designs were encouraged through open and flexible parameters. What the hotel wanted were creative and innovative spaces, not a series of standard fantasies such as one might encounter in Alberta's West Edmonton Mall or Las Vegas. The selected artists negotiated solutions that extended their ordinary practice, and the project itself supported and showcased local industry by patronising the surrounding community of small-scale commercial fabric printers, ceramicists, upholsterers and theatre set and interior designers.

Christina Zeidler is an artist of some note, involved in music, performance, filmmaking and other creative projects. Her commitment to the local community drives her interest in the commercial viability of the site, attracting and supporting local artists and finding practical solutions

to combat the creeping gentrification that threatens both the Gladstone and its eclectic surroundings in the 'Queen Street Triangle'. The aim has some urgency, as a current proposal by landowners in the area seeks to establish a master plan that would demolish a historic building housing 100 artists in live/work studios in order to build up to six high-rise towers. Such a project would irrevocably alter the character of the neighbourhood (Active 18 Association, n.d).

Space and the idea of the public

What are at stake here are definitions of community, public space and public art. The idea of the public has recently been hotly debated in contemporary art, particularly as cities face ongoing pressure to gentrify, raise density and legislate the interests of capital over social or community needs. In the US, a Supreme Court ruling on eminent domain, *Kelo v. the City of New London* (2005), grants local governments the right to expropriate land to facilitate commercial development in order to boost tax revenue. Pressure on the area around the Gladstone is indicative of tensions mounting in cities around the world, as proponents of redevelopment suggest that electronic networks and virtual space can satisfy the need for 'real space'.

In his ground-breaking essay, 'Towards a Critical Regionalism', Kenneth Frampton dismisses claims by urban planners that communities can exist 'without propinquity' or as 'non-places' in the urban realm, calling them 'slogans devised to rationalize the absence of any true public realm in the modern motopia' (Frampton, 1983, p. 25). To counter the proliferation of 'ubiquitous placelessness', Frampton argues for boundaries, designated 'place-forms' and 'clearly defined domains'. Such demarcated sites are necessary preconditions for the 'architecture of resistance' required to withstand what he calls 'the endless processal flux of the Megalopolis' (ibid., pp. 24–5).

Taking a more radical if dystopian view, Vito Acconci concedes that capital and dominant agendas shape the modern city: 'public art comes in through the back door, like a second-class citizen' (Acconci, 2004, p. 29). Yet this backdoor entry grants it rights to champion marginal positions, to form the 'opposition party'. The city already has all the design it needs, he believes; the task of public art is to interrupt the predetermined contract – to 'de-design' the public realm. 'Public art', he suggests, 'has to squeeze in and fit under or fall over what already exists in the city … Public space, in an electronic age, is space on the run. Public space is not space *in* the city but the city itself' (ibid., pp. 29–31).

Zeidler responds to the contraction of real space by creating new spaces for public interaction and art, generating what can be seen as an 'architecture

of resistance' that 'squeezes in and fits under' what already exists. Such architecture is understood to be 'potentially liberative in and of itself since it opens the user to manifold *experiences*' (Frampton, 1983, p. 25). In the new city, these 'guerrilla' spaces offer unexpected opportunities for democratic and public debate.

While critics differ over what constitutes the 'public' of public space (Schmidt-Wulffen, 2004; Craig, 2004; Armajani, 2004), it is not immodest to assert that artist-designed rooms at the Gladstone contribute a vital and integral component to a new complex of public-access multiple-use spaces within the hotel. In the context of shifting spending priorities and commercial pressures on the urban public realm, these sorts of spaces provide necessary and critical opportunities to experience, encounter and reflect, which transcend the merely aesthetic or entertaining. People must and do travel; creating moderately priced opportunities to encounter works of art while seeking shelter expands the number – and more importantly – the sorts of spaces available to the public to engage with and consume art. The rooms require interpretation, completion, even 'performance' by guests who, rather than linger a few minutes in passing, as they might in an art museum or train station, spend the night with them. Undeniably, this allows for the possibility of a more profound and transformative experience. The rooms provide alternative forms of display for crafted objects and opportunities for play, which as Robert Cook reminds us, 'is to opt out of the normal way of doing things and to explore, lightly but with intent, possibilities' (Cook, 2002, p. 29).

Travel and transformation

The experience is transformative and not dissimilar to that imagined in an earlier age of travel and grand hotels. Major designers in the 1930s and 1940s such as the American Dorothy Draper capitalised on travellers' desire to be 'bewitched' by theatricality and offered experiences away from their everyday routines. Draper pioneered the field of hotel design, transforming practical if unremarkable shelter into aesthetic attractions sought out for their provocative and lavish décor. Mitchell Owens described her dramatic interiors as equivalents of 'Joan Crawford at mid-career' (Owens, 2005, p. 260). Drawing on influences as diverse as the Italian Baroque, eighteenth-century French and English furniture, the buildings of Sir John Vanbrugh (1665–1726), the carvings of Grinling Gibbons (1648–1721), florid Victoriana and contemporary Art Deco and Surrealist art, Draper synthesised these with a sense of flare to create a modern *Gesamtkunstwerk* (ibid., pp. 266–8 and 275). She deployed large, flamboyant patterns, 'defiant' colour schemes and hyperbolic scale to envelop viewers in theatre:

[A] hotel styled by Dorothy Draper acted as an unconscious conduit of contemporary world culture for the average traveler, serving up edgy artistic movements with twenty-four hour room service … a Draperised hotel took travellers out of their humdrum daily lives and, like the cyclone that brought Dorothy Gale from the plains of Kansas to the Technicolor world of Munchkinland, abruptly inserted them into a special universe that existed only behind a revolving door. The hyper-scale environments transformed every patron into a virtual film star, an experience that neatly intersected with the American public's fascination with Hollywood and the possibility of reinventing one's identity (ibid., p. 285).

Making allowances for cultural shifts that have taken place since the 1930s, certain parallels provide for interesting comparisons with the Gladstone. Draper promoted her décor as more than an appropriately aesthetic backdrop; she used its styling to acquaint the travelling public to new trends in 'edgy' art; she employed eminent old-world craftsmen, such as the Cinquini family in Brooklyn, who carved most of her decorative stucco ornaments (ibid., p. 269); she envisioned travel in terms of 'reinventing one's identity', and her artistic interventions contributed to the profitability of the hotels whose interiors she reworked. Frank acknowledgement of profit might strike a jarring note but, increasingly, curators and makers are seeking alternatives to moribund grant systems to fund their projects. To return to Robert Cook, who embraces shopping and consumer culture as models for displaying contemporary art and craft:

One fantasy I have is that of the 'curated craft shop'. Everything would be available for the eye, the hand and the mind … We imagine objects fitting among other objects on our shelves, and the disarray would be enough to evoke all kinds of relations between objects … This stance is charged by the adventure of capitalism. Art, craft, whatever, should stand or fall on the common market (Cook, 2002, pp. 27–8).

Artist-designed hotel rooms and 'new craft'

For the paying guest in a hotel room, all aspects of the décor are available for imaginative manipulation. Paraphrasing Cook, guests imagine themselves in different scenarios, subjugating themselves 'for fun' (ibid., p. 27). A number of Gladstone rooms provoke this level of engagement through the comprehensiveness of their conception and realization. Several, such as 314, *The Billio Room*, designed by Bruno Billio; 404, *The Canadiana Room*, designed by The Big Stuff + Jenny Francis; and 414, *The Walls are Speaking*, designed by Day Milman and Bruno Billio, make specific reference to the hotel's locale and social setting. Billio combines original articles of hotel furniture with stacks of old books, creating functional sculptures with which participants interact in surprising and practical ways: drawers to vintage chests pull out to form desktops wired for computer access. *The Canadiana Room* updates

cultural icons such as racks of antlers assembled into chandeliers, wood-grain panels, backlit images of railway yards and photomurals of leafy forests to comment both ironically and affectionately on prevailing notions of Canadian identity. As the designers note, 'we are fabricating nostalgia: a brief, whimsical fantasy of Canada' (Gladstone Hotel, n.d.). Room 414, *The Walls are Speaking*, features original toile wallpaper printed with drawings of local musicians and characters well known to hotel patrons. Other rooms create environments that reflect on the sensation of dislocation and disorientation experienced by the traveller. Several, in particular, present positive examples of how 'new craft' rises to challenges posed by such liminal spaces.

The term 'new craft' is used to acknowledge that contemporary craft practice has diversified in a multiplicity of directions no longer representing a homogenous whole. This is not to say that traditional skills and tacit knowledge of materials are disavowed, but they are now subjected to a broader set of criteria. Grace Cochrane identifies what constitutes a crafts approach for her as 'the development of ideas through a skilled interaction with materials and the technologies associated with them' (Cochrane, 2004). While this might characterise diverse activities, it predominates in those who make work 'through feeling, touching, shaping and reshaping' (ibid.), as is characteristic of craft practices. Self-identified craft makers have, for the most part, trained alongside fine artists and designers and been exposed to the same sorts of theoretical debates that have shaped those practices. Crossovers between craft and fine arts have been the norm for some time. Australian curator Robyn Daw asserts:

Various postmodern tools (in particular the pliers and crowbars of feminist and postcolonialist theories) have assisted in trashing the boundaries between visual arts and the territory in which textiles have historically operated. I like the idea that crochet is as legitimate a way of creating a work of art as oil paint on canvas, or that installation can involved fine stitching or stretched pantyhose, or that embroidery can involve wire and steel alongside fine silks (Daw, 2002, p. 36).

Not only have boundaries between craft practices and the fine arts dissolved, makers move between craft and design with increasing confidence. Helen Rees writes:

Design and craft used to be explicable by the dichotomy of values which separated them: machine-made vs. handmade; mass-market vs. luxury-market; urban vs. rural; innovative vs. traditional; sophisticated vs. vernacular; male vs. female. Today, the distance between these spheres of making is not so wide nor so fixed: new technology has reinvented the economics of scale in manufacturing, and designers and craftspeople share the language of postmodernism. The boundary between design and craft (and also between craft and art) is porous (Rees, 1997, pp. 134–5).

13.2   Melissa Levin, Room 309, *The Puzzle Room*. Photo: Cat O'Neil

Practitioners of 'new craft' bring skills from craft, design and fine art to their articulation of room interiors. Melissa Levin, designer of 309, *The Puzzle Room* (Fig. 13.2), is a filmmaker who taught textile printing at Sheridan College in Ontario for five years. Recuperating from a lengthy illness, she began to amuse herself by assembling puzzles. Her expertise with pattern, repeat and sequence deriving from both filmmaking and textile printing attracted her to this popular pastime. She realised that commercial puzzles are often cut with the same die, and thus pieces are interchangeable. Designing a frieze from vintage puzzles depicting tourist views of six North American cities, she capitalised on the disorientation and déjà vu one experiences in such cities, many of which have similar skylines, buildings, signature stores and

infrastructures. Having cleverly interlocked pieces from different puzzles to create 'impossible' views of each, she writes:

I mixed up the pieces so that buildings no longer sit on any foundation, or are completely out of place. Bridges end haphazardly, the reflection of the Toronto Sky Dome is the wrong place for the building, and the Twin Towers no longer stand upright but rest in the water only as a mere reflection (Gladstone Hotel, n.d.).

The use of both hand- and ready-made components characterises much new craft. Discussing an exhibition by ceramicist Carol McNicoll, Jorunn Veiteberg notes that her installations include 'purchased images and things as elements in a universe which also contains images and objects she has made herself' (Vieteberg, 2004). Drawing attention to distinctions between the two classes of objects questions cultural hierarchies and entrenched aesthetic positions while signalling critical distance from elite art. Vieteberg points to French theoretician Nicolas Bourriaud, who claims that 'an artist's job is to absorb things produced in other contexts and to recycle and duplicate them' (ibid.). In terms of craft, Levin's manipulation of puzzle pieces finds parallels in activities such as piecing quilts, assembling mosaics or beadwork – activities in which ready-made, found or commercial components are used to generate a design, pattern or image. The skill lies in framing and manipulating rather than in creating the component parts.

Peter Dormer refers to such commercial components as systems, kits or 'distributed knowledge', noting that many makers today incorporate such elements into their work. No longer defining craft in terms of made-by-hand rather than made-by-machine, contemporary craft acknowledges roots in both tacit – or hands-on – and distributed knowledge (Dormer, 1997, pp. 144–5). Levin transforms mundane and commercial imagery into impossible architecture; her unmoored and alien structures read as metaphors for provisional, 'mix-and-match' or hyphenated identities, ethnicities and sexualities characteristic of contemporary urban life. The handcrafted sensibility with which she pieces together the mismatched puzzles interjects personal narrative and subjectivity, disrupting complacent perceptions of everyday things.

Accompanying the frieze is a video monitor displaying various views around the city. The CN tower, Toronto's most visible landmark, appears constantly, functioning helpfully to orient the traveller and ironically as a reminder of the omnipresence of capital overseeing the city. Working with cabinetmaker Lisa Dooher, Levin designed special furniture to fit within the tight quarters of the room, creating an effect that is at once playful and disconcerting. Ordinary chromed plumbing material appears to emerge from within the walls to form a desk that wraps around the body; lengths of tubing loop into side tables that resemble the port windows of a ship. Additional details in the room include puzzles assembled inside the bathroom cabinet,

puzzle button-tufts on the headboard and, amusingly, a Gideon's Bible puzzle. Levin's use of jigsaw puzzles reflects her own experience of convalescence and calls attention to how puzzles are used in specific institutions such as hospitals, senior citizens' homes or long-term care facilities, where inmates are unable to travel except in fantasy. Bittersweet, humorous and critical, *The Puzzle Room* explores 'our uneasy times while representing a kind of collapsed time and memory' (Gladstone Hotel, n.d.).

Allyson Mitchell describes herself as a 'maximalist artist', and this is, if anything, an understatement. In addition to teaching and researching issues around body image, sexuality, feminist activism and popular culture, Mitchell makes films, stages performances and creates imaginative fun-fur sculptures and installations. Dedicated to 'reclaiming outmoded craft practices', her studio at the Gladstone serves as a launching pad for exhibitions of 'craft projects abandoned by others' (Mitchell, home page) – 'granny square' extravaganzas, pastel bunnies and all manner of abject, abandoned, kitsch and otherwise outré objects – a practice that has roots in feminism, social activism and performance art. Like Levin, Mitchell uses ready-made components and activities associated with leisure or hobbycraft to mount a social critique. Curator Shannon Stratton focuses extensively on these new forms of craft and their association with 'hobby' art:

The artists who are making with hobby materials are increasingly creating work that seems to transcend political arguments between art and craft, and have neatly devised ways to proudly demonstrate that the well 'crafted' object makes for smart art. The art of the assembling is apparent and, in fact, often pertinent to the work itself by finding methods which frame the work conceptually and bridge a gap between what it means to craft, be creative and be active in social commentary (Stratton, 2004).

Based on sexist comics found in 1970s *Playboy* magazines, Mitchell has reclaimed 'beasty', hyper-sexualised and large-scaled women for a radical lesbian agenda (Mitchell, home page). With tongue firmly in cheek, Mitchell exhibits towering fun-fur sculptures of Lady Sasquatches: 'your dream girl only bigger and hairier – and she might eat you if you don't look out'. These beguiling creatures populate guest room 304 (Fig. 13.3), *Faux Naturelle*, at the Gladstone. She describes her room as 'a woodsy retreat where lesbian separatist commune meets Storybook Gardens'. One wall is covered with a bucolic scene of hefty female satyrs happily disporting in an overgrown sylvan glade, while the other walls are covered with faux-wood grain or rough-hewn rock wallpaper simulating a grotto. For travellers seeking an erotic, lesbian-positive and self-empowering getaway, this room delivers as much with wicked humour and high spirits. From the perspective of craft, the quality of the 'work(wo)manship' is high – the various snippets of fun-fur are skilfully selected, joined and sculpted to produce surfaces of extraordinary tactility and appeal. Mitchell's academic work examines the roots of misogyny, fear

13.3   Allyson Mitchell, Room 304, *Faux Naturelle*. Photo: Cat O'Neil

of women's sexuality and the edict that only white, slim and youthful bodies can be sexy. Her theoretical work reclaims the body and documents the sort of activism she explores in her films, lectures, craft-ins and art installations. *Faux Naturelle* returns craft to its roots in 'cunning', asserting that politics lies at the heart of any public art, that craft practices are often pointedly critical and that theory and pleasure cohabit the most memorable work.

   Room 407 (Fig. 13.4), *Racine*, by Susan Collett, Penelope Stewart and Nicholas Stirling, is both richly appointed and fully engaged with questions of identity, memory and experience. Each collaborator works within commercial and fine arts practices. Collett, a prize-winning printmaker and fine art ceramicist, produces functional lines of domestic dinnerware, fireplace mantles and

13.4   Susan Collett, Penelope Stewart and Nicholas Stirling, Room 407, *Racine*.
Author's photo

tile interiors. Stewart operated a made-to-order textile printing business
while simultaneously exhibiting large-scale installations of architecturally
based photo-printed fabric across Canada and abroad. Stirling composes
and performs music for feature films, documentaries and television series.
The strength of their partnership lies in their understanding of the porous
borders between art, craft and design, in which practical skills, knowledge of
execution, sensibility towards materials and imaginative play all contribute
to significant content.

Responding to the Gladstone's history as a safe and comfortable
destination for female travellers, the trio devised a narrative featuring Mrs
Beaseley, whose luggage and postcard collection they discovered in an
antique shop (Collett, 2005; Stewart, 2005). The narrative unfolds through a
series of postcards, a soundtrack and accessories to the room. Some of these
were discovered in flea markets and antique shops; their appearance here
supports environmentally sustainable design through re-use, re-purpose
and re-cycle (Rees, 1997, p. 134), demonstrating yet again how contemporary
craft freely mixes found with fabricated elements for specific effect. For
example, the television and DVD player are hidden in a tower constructed

from found items of vintage luggage. A weathered leather grip resembling a Gladstone bag – the valise that gave the hotel's newsletter its name – serves as a wastebasket. The name of the room, *Racine*, means 'root'; Collett's ceramic headboard and sculptural wall sconces replicate upended roots to suggest the pleasurable if disconcerting experience of being uprooted, in transit. Stirling's audio track, which can be switched on at will, narrates a series of postcards written by an imagined female traveller. Alternating interior and exterior, past and present, the track jostles references to events and landmarks from an earlier time with auditory impressions of activities one might encounter in the streets today. The multicultural context of travel is acknowledged as the phrase 'Welcome to the Gladstone', repeated by native speakers in numerous languages, greets those staying in the room. Throughout, the designers were interested in travel as a phenomenon. Various components of the room acknowledge the desire to move beyond the self that counters the desire to remain safely at home. Bedside tables have mirrored tops with the words 'push' and 'pull' etched into them. Stewart's screen-printed pillows, curtains and upholstery mix text with images of maps, stamps, mazes and related subjects to further develop this theme. The room becomes a theatrical site in which participants experience simultaneously the thrill of performing identity while reflecting on the revelation that it consists of a series of interchangeable props, memories and relationships with community and place.

The Gladstone project engages the public in critical and revealing ways through functional, attractive and commercially viable décor. Clearly the question is no longer one of distinguishing between or hierarchically ranking design, craft and fine art. Rather, it is one of recognising the continuum of current practice, which moves between these once-clearly defined areas, adapting strengths and technologies particular to each. As new digital technologies alter marketing apparatuses, opportunities for small-scale, niche or even one-of-a-kind production extend to designers previously constrained by economies of scale (Atkinson, 2004). Innovative designers embrace opportunities to explore materials and relationships traditionally associated with craft. Contemporary craft practitioners understand markets well, solving problems with practical solutions. Many are artschool-trained and engage with issues of identity, ethics and the ethos of everyday life. The intrinsic attraction of craftspeople to the materials and processes of real-world making mitigates alienation and contradictions of consumer culture and global capitalism not by simplifying or papering over fissures with bombastic rhetoric but by acknowledging, integrating and opening them to speculative play. Pointing to the interdependence of pleasure and criticism, Olaf Nicolai insists: 'The staging of the sensual, the forms of pleasure, disclose discursive qualities that are not so much in competition with a reflexive, understandable level than they are the basis for it' (Nicolai, 2004, p. 172).

Projects such as the artist-designed rooms at the Gladstone counter with small and modest steps the cynicism or defeatism that concedes dominion over the public and social to the homogenising and irresponsible forces of global capitalism. Those who work with craft practices have much to contribute to this wider discussion through their participation in projects in the public space. It is through recognising creative contributions of makers in all fields of cultural production that we envision community and nurture the local.

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