

LOOM · ROOM · HARP

All enclosed spaces were at one point outside, and are still pervaded by its existential medium of air, despite erected boundaries. Architectural interiority is rooted in a pervasive idea of a personal or corporeal interiority, as though we were looking out from inside our bodies. Our recently realized project LOOM · ROOM · HARP questions this notion of interiority and its consequences at a corporeal, architectural, and urban scales in the specific context of the Anderson Gallery at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, U.S.A..

In the 1960's, Drake University initiated a campus expansion with a masterplan by Eliel and Eero Saarinen, buildings by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Harry and Ben Weese, and landscape by Hideo Sasaki, taking advantage of the surrounding neighborhood economically disadvantaged over decades by "redlining" policies implemented since the 1930's. Redlining was a mapping system implemented by the United States Federal Housing Administration that analyzed and color-coded neighborhoods, identifying areas of low to high risk for banks and mortgage lenders.¹ The implementation of this system during the era of Jim Crow racial segregation meant that areas with non-white or mixed-race populations were automatically given a negative rating, regardless of economic class or vitality.² In Des Moines, the area to the west of the Drake campus was colored green, indicating lowest risk, with the best property values and a white population. The Drake campus itself was colored blue, indicating a low risk "buffer zone."³ The area immediately to the east of the campus was colored yellow and red, the two highest risk categories, for racially mixed populations, where federally backed home loans were not available and no investment was recommended.⁴

This economic disinvestment was compounded by the construction of Interstate 235 (1961-68) through Des Moines, which razed the economic hub of the African American community. With slogans such as "Let there be LIGHT instead of BLIGHT," Drake University's modernist campus expansion over the 1960's was framed as an urban renewal project against "urban blight," caused in part by a history of such policies and projects.⁵

The Harmon Fine Arts Center that currently houses the gallery was designed by the office of the Chicago-based architect, Ben Weese, and built (1967-72) as a part of this expansion. Its S-shaped plan that frames two courtyards, and open ground floor colonnade were designed to accommodate existing houses whose owners refused to sell to the university, despite

¹ "What is Redlining?" Redlining in DSM, last modified August 7, 2022, <https://www.redliningindsm.com/h>

² "Iowa's Redlining Maps," Redlining in DSM, last modified August 7, 2022, <https://www.redliningindsm.com/the-map>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Maura Lyons, "Act I: 'Creating a Saarinen-Weesian Jewel Box,'" in *Mies Weese at Drake: Where We Live And Work* (Des Moines: Drake University, 2017), 11.

neighborhood blight. The new building wound around and besieged the remaining wood-framed houses.

These houses were acquired by the university and demolished in 1990. The Anderson Gallery, designed by Baldwin White Architects in 1996, was created by enclosing the majority of the open colonnade at ground floor of the Fine Arts Center. The black slate cladding of the infill preserves the sense that the mass of the building is raised up on piers. The infilled gallery forms a wall along the street that is both completely opaque and camouflaged to be invisible. To the west of the gallery is what is now the pedestrian core of the Drake campus. On the eastern edge a “moat” of university parking lots was created by clearing the block of houses. These actions reinforced the redlining and articulate an interior and exterior of the campus at an urban scale.

For the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Anderson Gallery, we were invited to propose an installation that would engage the gallery’s architecture. The hermetic, “white cube” interior of the gallery, the opacity and amnesia of its walls, and the acoustic “deadness” of the space made sense only as we started to understand how this room had come to be.

LOOM · ROOM · HARP used sets of analog and digital instruments inside and outside the gallery to perforate its walls and collapse this distance through drawing, performance, and a series of accumulated sonic and visual artifacts. The project has three main components: The ROOM of the gallery, a weaving LOOM and textile built into the room, and a HARP that was housed in the room but roamed outside during performances.

ROOM

Architectural features from outside were projected into the room as wall drawings. The east wall of the gallery reflected the architectural openings from the closest neighborhood houses, across the moat of parking lots. From the west came the stone benches of a remaining fragment of the former colonnade, immediately on the other side of the wall. These interior drawings were made with white paint on the otherwise off-white walls, appearing as the mark of an absence, or the stain of something bleeding through.

On the exterior of the east wall, facing out from the campus, we drew the interior contents of the exhibition space, creating a degree of transparency in the otherwise opaque, camouflaged facade. This drawing, in white and fluorescent pink gaffer tape, represented the loom, the woven fabric, the harp, and the speakers, as well as the moveable walls and pedestals inside the gallery space. These were drawn in elevation, orthographically projecting their exact locations and placements inside the gallery.

LOOM

The main occupant of the gallery was an AVL “Compudobby” loom. It is a hand operated weaving loom with a “dobby” computer. The computer controls the combination of harnesses that lift the warp (tensioned threads), lifting different combinations of threads each time using digital information.

The structure for the woven fabric in LOOM ROOM HARP is a combination of a plain ground fabric and an “overshot” pattern. The structure of the ground of the fabric is a plain weave using only black threads. The plain black pattern weave is then “overshot” with a thicker white thread, allowing for improvisation with the patterning while maintaining the structural integrity of the fabric. Although the initial pattern decisions were made in advance of the exhibition, the line-by-line pattern decisions were made through a piece of custom software that listened to the room during each performance, assigning a pattern number to the pitch of the room at a designated interval, which were then woven into the continuously expanding fabric.

The fabric, which traditionally would be wound around the back “fabric beam” of the loom, instead extended across the room to rollers anchored to the floor and ceiling, allowing for many yards of the fabric to be seen at once, and telling the visual story of the room and the performances it contained over the timeline of the exhibition. The fabric “on view” changed slowly throughout the exhibition, contributing to the dynamic atmosphere of the room.

HARP

The harp was an electric aeolian harp made in relation to the proportions and dimensions of the architecture of the gallery. It has two steel ribbon strings, eight feet long and spaced four feet apart, on either side of the harpist. The strings are spaced apart, across the body of the harpist, allowing the harpist to perceive the atmosphere as a dynamic thickness with eddies and currents.

One can get the harp to sing simply by walking or turning with it, but here it was used as a set of antennae, a listening and locating device, looking for micro-climatic breezes and walls of increased air pressure in the environment between the gallery and adjacent neighborhood.

THE SOUND OF LOOM · ROOM · HARP

The design of the sound for LOOM · ROOM · HARP engaged ideas of the past and present commingling, inside and outside leaking into one another, bridging the sounds produced by the loom and the harp, the structural particularities of this room, and the conceptual world inspired by the work of Tim Ingold, who contributed an original essay as part of this exhibition.⁶ The sound draws on our excitement for exploring the bounds of performance

⁶ Tim Ingold, “LOOM-ROOM-HARP,” in *LOOM·ROOM·HARP* (Des Moines: Drake University, 2022).

and improvisation, looking for its edges and the non-normative relationships they invite. We used an unconventional range of sound processing, streaming, and spatialization techniques to forge intersecting layers and trajectories of audio throughout the room. All of it was live. And, by *live*, we mean that the loom sang quietly even when not occupied. Echoes of the harp and its peripatetic path punctuated the space, and the room listened to it all.

Inside the room, the layers of sound were generated in real time, shifting and responding to fluctuations in the space. The layers of audio were live-streamed so that remote listeners could drop into the space even when the gallery was not open. Scheduled performances linked all of these spaces in real time and, using overlapping streaming technologies, invited guests contributed their responses to the space. People could listen in-person in the room or remotely online.

Roaming outside the room, the harp, affixed with its own speakers, microphones, and streaming capabilities, also projected back into the room and to a custom live-electronics setup utilized in performance. This meant that the sound of traffic, birds and insects, ambient conversation, and in one case a marching band were all invited into the space and performances.

Enabling all these layers of overlap required orchestrating the sound-emitting sources across the room. The quietest sounds often came from the loom, which emitted high tones based on analysis of all the sounds in the space beginning at the opening of the exhibition. Transducers were affixed to the interior surface of the loom, so that as the audience passed it, they could lean in and hear those tones.

Speaker cones mounted on planks of wood leaned against the walls of the exhibition space. These utilized live sampling of the harp, indoor, and outdoor sounds, and field recordings of the exterior space. Techniques of granular synthesis and panning were utilized to create arcs of sound that moved across the room. The overall effect created an uncanny body of insects chirping away in the room, and if one listened closely, they could hear small fragments of other audio (insects, cars, the harp) emerge from within these tiny sounds. Microphones hidden in the space and placed on the edges of the doors to outside meant that the interior and exterior of the room became permeable.

Additionally, recorded room resonances swelled into the space marking every hour. Though one would have to strain to hear it, every half hour was marked with a time-stretched recording of Matthusen reading a quote from Tim Ingold's *Lines* that served as inspiration—"To be a place, every somewhere must lie on one or several paths of movement to and from places elsewhere."⁷

⁷ Tim Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 3.

These constructs of time invited into the space (*on the hour, the half-hour*) created a fuzzy clock, for the passage of time inside the room is hard to perceive, while the passage of time outside the room is beholden to the many disparate time worlds of human and non-human agencies. Performance, in its potential for occurring in the moment and across temporalities, becomes a meeting point and site for creative engagement. The musicians, Sam Wells and Terri Hron each joined a performance virtually, adding their instruments and rooms and latencies to the already complex set of exchanges in the project. The Iowa-based artist, Cameron Gray contributed to the final performance with an installation just outside the gallery, locating and eulogizing the homes in their former site.

In the exhibition catalog, Tim Ingold states that “to bring space and time together is to restore an architecture of straight lines and planar surfaces to the elemental fluxes of the atmosphere,” a shared medium that is both affective and subject to the weather. The exhibition and performances do not offer solutions to the problematic history of this place, but instead open a way to resist the prejudices of its architecture by inhabiting it otherwise. Instead of a container of vacuous space, the floors and walls of the gallery for a time became a scaffold to an unruly thickness of exchanges, engagements, and entanglements across interior and exterior, here and there, past and present and the possible.