

The Disorder of the Dining Table

INTRODUCTION

We became very interested in the Everyday when we were young teachers in the early 1990s. Shortly afterwards, we began working on the early design stages of Stock Orchard Street, colloquially known as the Straw Bale House. Drawn to the work of Michel de Certeau, Henri Lefebvre and others, we felt that architecture's connections with power and money balanced its potential in the wrong direction, and that the results often served the public poorly. People put up with what is given them by developers, planners and designers. Their genuine participation in shaping the world around them is limited, and usually confrontational. Architects seem interested in creating monuments to their own creativity and there is a hierarchy involved, in which large civic buildings, especially arts and cultural projects, and expensive privately-endowed monuments are the holy grail.

At the same time, these buildings serve the elite and do not form much part in people's daily experiences and routines. The local High Street, the school, the shops and cafes, the GP's surgery, the bus stop or train station, the typical workspace – these are the places occupied on a daily basis by ordinary people conducting their ordinary lives. They are places typically occupied by women, whose experience is often overlooked. Ordinary citizens spend most of their hours in such places, and as such, they deserve to be better. For we all acknowledge (at least, those that are aware of spatial practice at all) that a better environment is better for physical and mental health and wellbeing, self esteem, productivity and a positive attitude to life. By neglecting these basic pieces of infrastructure, architects abrogate responsibility and care to those that don't care or those who don't appreciate their importance.

We felt this was neglectful and wrong. We recognised that designers had a role to play

in improving everyday backdrops, and wanted to highlight the role the Everyday can play in everyone's experience and enjoyment. In particular, we were excited by the fact that everyday places are those in which people can occupy with greatest creativity. For example, the public realm can't be controlled, so people can use it in unpredictable ways, from simple jay walking, sticking up a notice about a lost cat, leaving your old furniture out on the street for someone who wants it to take away, to more organised or considered events like running a race or performing street theatre. This sort of 'play' is the type of behaviour celebrated by de Certeau when he talks of the actions people can perform against the 'proprietary powers'. They are mini acts of creativity, of resistance and of challenge to the norms. Yet architects have a problematic relationship with this kind of behaviour because it doesn't conform to predicted models, and challenges their notion of control.

Spatial practice should be about celebrating these acts of creativity, embracing unpredicted events and laying out possibilities for imagination. Instead of closing these down, we want to embrace such potential creativity, inviting people to explore space and place in unexpected ways.

The dining table drawings take up this idea and illustrate how this could play out in the planning of a home. At the same time, the set of images illustrates the problem of representing action within the confines of conventional orthographic projection. The latter privileges static space and time, ideality and, of course, predictability. But in doing so, it closes down unexpected action, making assumptions about rituals and cultural preferences that may not actually pertain. In so doing it closes our eyes to diverse ways of understanding the world.

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THE DRAWINGS

Working within the parameters of cultural custom and practice, the scenario is set for a meal for eight people. The table top represents the plane on which the action takes place but at a larger scale could be a floor plane. The **first drawing** represents the world as the architect sees it: a white ground that signifies the pristine, the tabula rasa, and the black lines that depict the outlines of a controllable event - static, ritualistic and predictable. We assume what will take place and take it for granted.

The **second drawing**, however, represents what happens over the duration of the meal, capturing the event as it unfolds in time. Like a Muybridge time-lapse sequence, it records successive moments in the movements of diners' chairs and tableware as they socialise, enjoy themselves and linger over the meal.

Just like Muybridge's work, orthography is not the obvious medium to capture time. Like movies, the method involves mini-moments of stillness. But put together, these moments add up to an evocation of the event in which your imagination can fill the gaps. Although apparently chaotic, our knowledge of the unfolding meal allows us to understand what is going on.

To our minds, this more accurately captures the event than the first drawing. Accepting the accidents, embracing the unexpected and learning to admire the 'dirt' that results, is part of acknowledging that life isn't always as we expected; and this challenges our ability, as architects, to predict and manage the realities of lived experience.

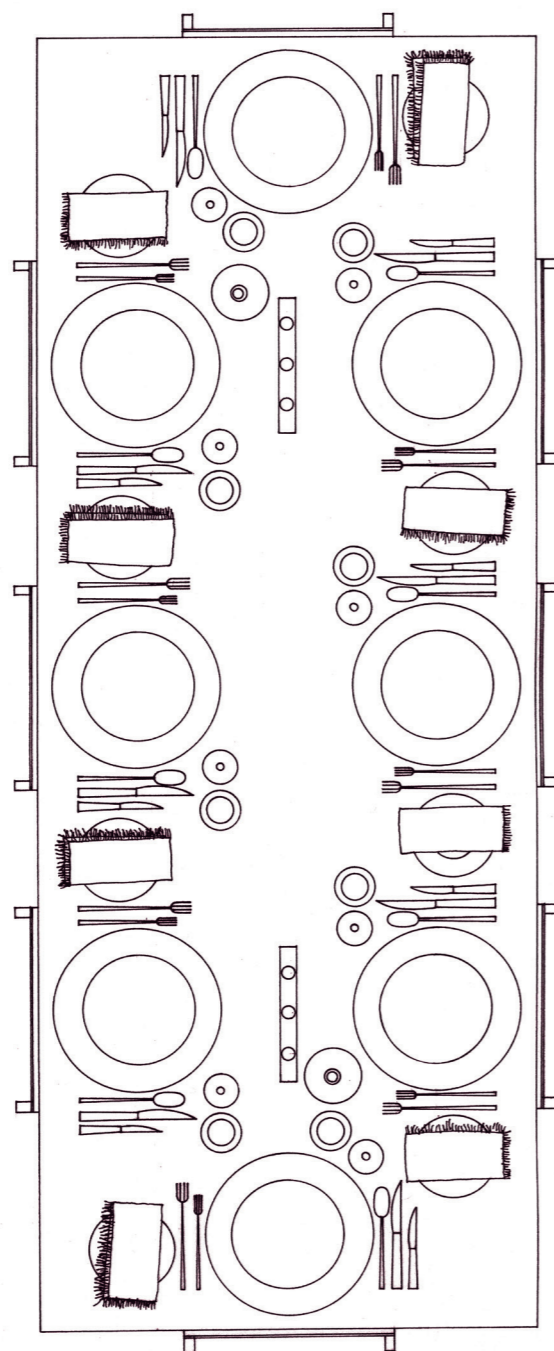


Fig. 1 - The Lay of the Table. An architectural ordering of place, status and function.
A frozen moment of perfection.
THE DISORDER OF THE DINING TABLE © Sarah Wigglesworth, 1997.

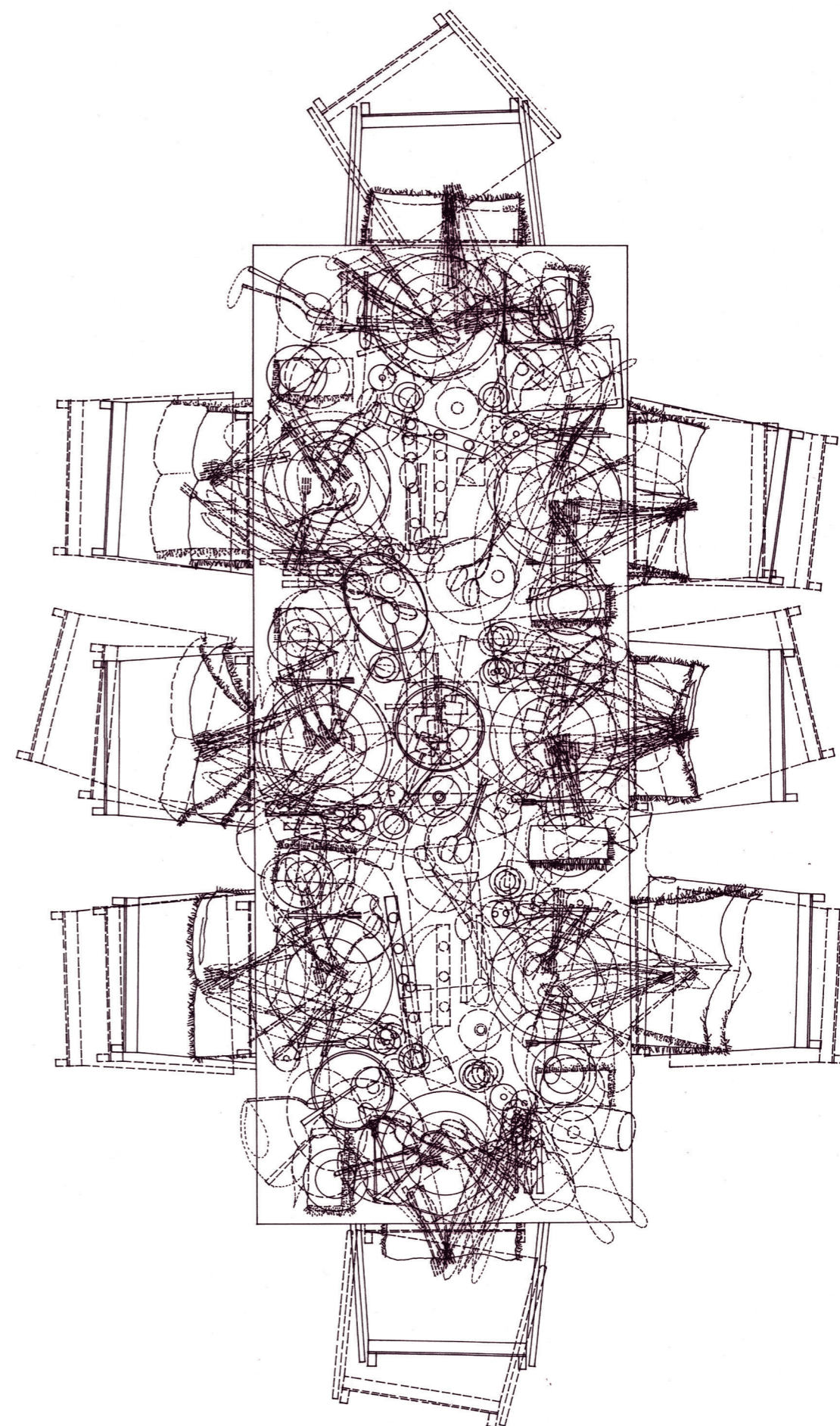


Fig. 2 - The Meal. Use begins to undermine the apparent stability of the (architectural) order. Traces of occupation in time.
The recognition of life's disorder.
THE DISORDER OF THE DINING TABLE © Sarah Wigglesworth, 1997.

As a record of the finished event, the **third drawing** documents the traces left behind on the table top. Like the Turin shroud, the cloth bears witness and registers the happening for posterity. Once again, the image is static, but the traces left on the 'tablecloth' are a reminder of the unique but random social intercourse that took place as the meal advanced in time.

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This is what an architecture of the Everyday must do.

The plan of the house at Stock Orchard Street follows the order of the trace of the meal. This is shown in the **fourth drawing**.

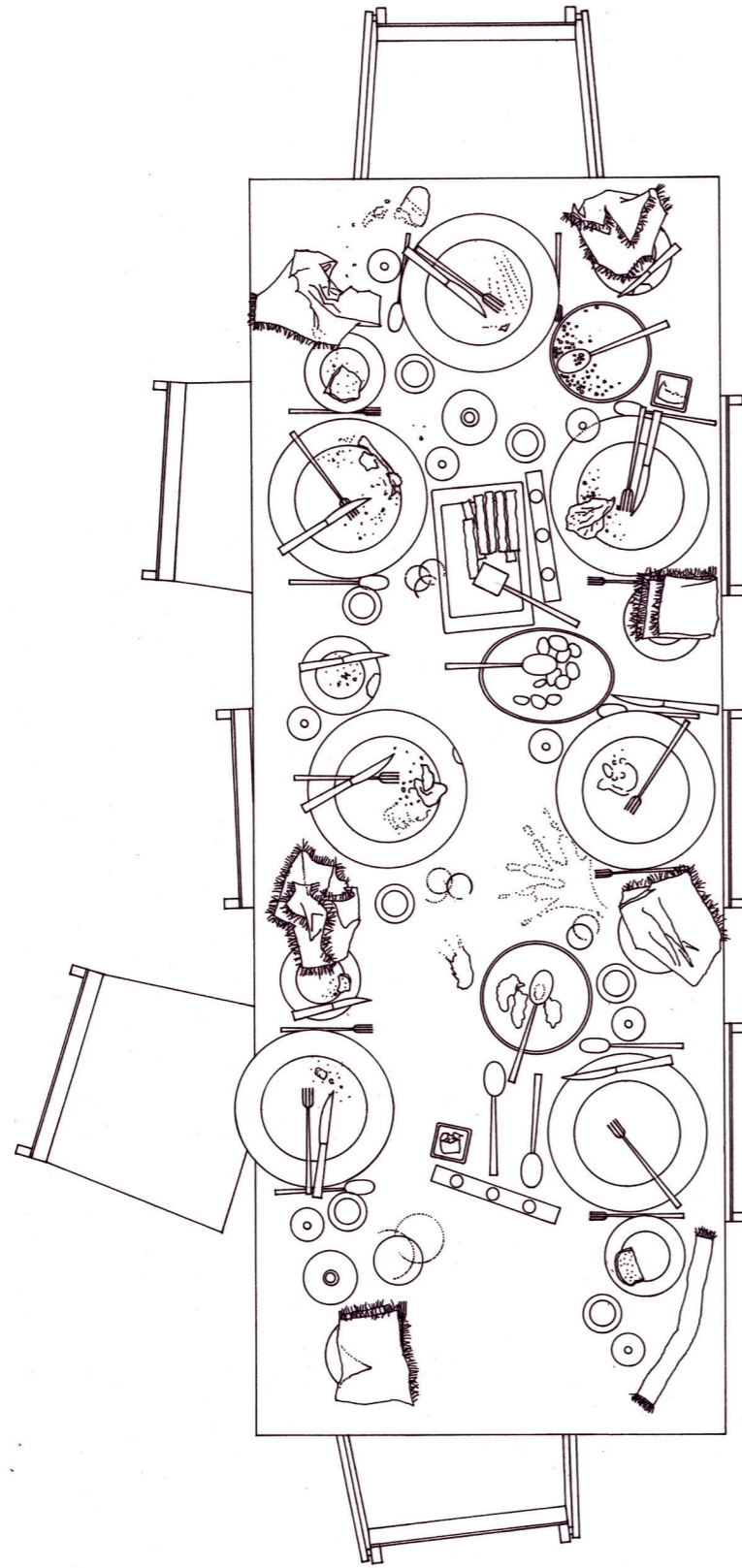


Fig. 3 - The Trace. The dirty tablecloth, witness of disorder.
Between space and time. The palimpsest.
THE DISORDER OF THE DINING TABLE © Sarah Wigglesworth, 1997.

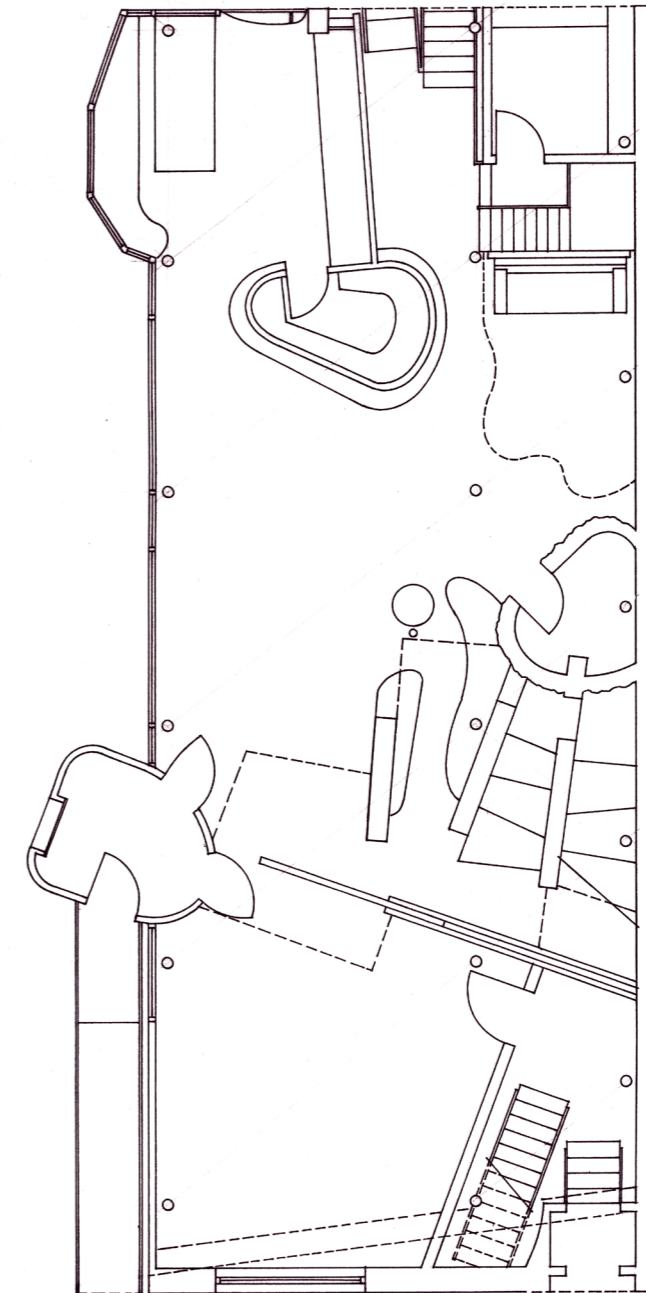


Fig. 4 - The Lay of the Plan. The trace transformed into a plan. Clutter filling the plan(e).
Domestic difficulties disrupting the order of the grid.
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