

You, Me, & the Bees



Jan Smitheram*

Department of Architecture, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

Submission: January 15, 2018; **Published:** February 26, 2018

***Corresponding author:** Jan Smitheram, Department of Architecture, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand,
Email: jan.smitheram@vuw.ac.nz

Abstract

All over the world, dwindling bee populations are a cause for concern, with some species of bee now officially marked as endangered. To support the bees, this paper speculates on a world where bee kind and humankind live intertwined with one another. Through design, this paper questions anthropocentric norms embodied in design, which turn us away from the non-human. This project incorporates nonhuman agency as an active agent in creating a design, which explores a becoming- with others - in a flourishing world.

Keywords: Anthropocentric; Bees; Feminism; Brute matter; Spirited life; Matriarchal society; Scenography

Introduction

Bees are dying. All over the world, dwindling bee populations are a cause for concern, with some species of bee officially marked as endangered [1]. Not only is another organism at risk of loss, but bees are a vital part of the earth's ecosystem, pollinating one third of our food [2]. At the same time, bees living in the city have been found to be healthier than those in the country [3]. These findings triggered thoughts of how living intimately with bees could be a response to this ecological problem. Through design as scholarship, this final year project, speculated upon a world where bee kind and humankind live intertwined with one another.

This paper situates itself as engaging with the emerging trend of 'new materialism, which has already left its mark on fields such as feminism, philosophy, cultural theory and the arts. And the project that underscores this paper began by questioning the hierarchical positioning of human over nature, which legitimates the hierarchical dominance within human society [4]. New Materialism was seen as a supportive guide-to question anthropocentric norms. Bennett argues species-narcissism is perpetuated by two governing ideas. The first is the separation of "brute matter" and "spirited life". This is the idea that living organisms are "radically other to matter", where life remains "special". The second idea is that of those with "special" life, humans are the "most special", i.e. "man has the most life" [5]. For Bennett, ending the idea of "brute matter" vs. "spirited life" and instead acknowledging the spirited vitality of the nonhuman around us is an important, and powerful way to undercut societal hierarchies.

To explore the vitality of a new materialist position this speculative project, was structured around scale. This meant I explored my proposition through an installation, a domestic building and a public building. First, this allowed critical reflection to be staged through the design, to refine the proposition, process and methods. Secondly, the client of the bee created a scale of occupation different to usual human-scaled environments, which provides an opportunity to critique architectures traditional privileging of the large over the small. Progressive scale is also used to structure this paper. There is no intent that this imagined space would be realized; but, we suggest this gap from reality frees us to consider ways that changes in architecture can be truly transformative [6].

Installation

The installation aimed to question conventions of human bias - a straight forward look embedded in the conventions of drawing, namely the experience of viewing a drawing that tries to force an 'awry look. 'Alongside the more literary research, I attended bee seminars. I followed bees around. I translated scientific information about bees' vision into drawings: I drew with magnifying sheets and kaleidoscope glasses. I drew with UV paint. These explorations felt forced; they were neither scientifically valid nor creatively expressive, but rather an indecisive in-between. But, these explorations informed the process of building up notations which were extracted and collapsed into a single drawing; drawn in conjunction with my imagined apian collaborator. The original drawing is composed

for linear observation from left to right, positioned vertically, face to face with the viewer (Figure 1). The drawing was then

copied, and cut up. The replication is presented as a manipulable pile complementary to the original (Figure 2).



Figure 1: Miami Science Barge Platform, Retrieved from The New Tropic web article.



Figure 2: Re-worked installation (Image by Author).

The replication and rearrangement of the original into its not-quite twin could also be interpreted as the final step of human-bee collaboration; with the drawing reconfigured and dispersed at an appropriate scale for an audience of bees, with neither version claiming to be the 'correct' version. The role of the installation informed the next design stage by continuing to question drawing conventions, and established a visual language that continues through the whole project.

Domestic Space

The first building that I put bees into was an apartment for a single woman. Unlike humans, bees live in a matriarchal society, where the queen bee is central and essential to the livelihood of an entire hive. Here, by introducing bees into a human realm, the house for a human and nonhuman pair of Queen Bees critiques stigmas of women living alone. Terms given to women who live alone-spinster, crazy cat lady, shengnu (Chinese for 'left over women'), all label the single woman as a social outsider pitied rather than celebrated. The heterosexist biases that shape these

terms also shapes the language of contemporary ecology, which all too often focuses on "matters of inheritance and procreation" [7]. In response this apartment seeks to re-appropriate the term queen bee into something positive, a place that celebrates the weird alien sisterhood between bee and woman.

Although the residents are fictional, their programmatic requirements drew from both real and unreal source material, including secret single behaviours of the author, and actual bee behaviour. The design started by fusing the installation with the authors own house. The plan and elevation were pulled and twisted into perspective drawings – providing hints of occupiable spaces (Figure 3 & 4). The drawings evolved through the creative friction between the two types of drawings; but, they were also shaped by the programmatic needs – of both queen bees. Drawings were multiplied, collaged, overlaid in an attempt to open up further spatial possibilities. The composite drawings were animated, to bring duration and the event space of the two queens more forcefully into the drawings (Figure 5).

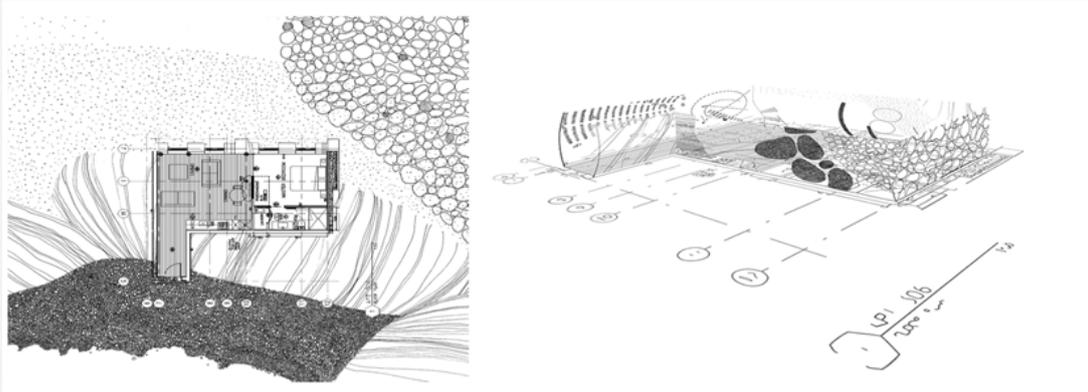


Figure 3 & 4: Applying installation to technical drawings. (Image by Author).

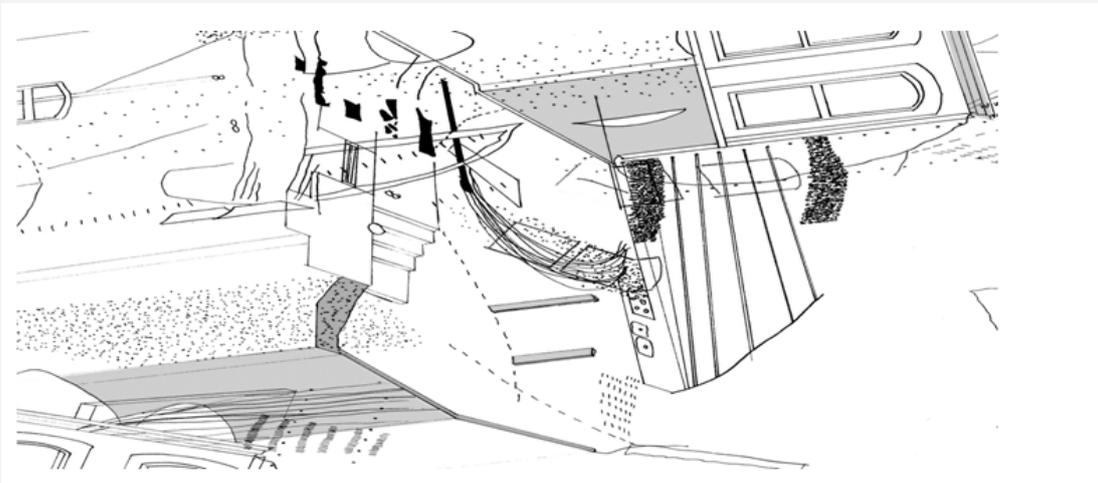


Figure 5: Composite drawing. (Image by Author).

The final building is not conventional (Figure 6). The 'plan and section' of the apartment are chronological rather than conventional, the subject of the drawing the rich inner lives of the queen bees. The house arises accordingly to particular moments

of inhabitation. The drawings question the meanings we ascribe to the house and also the conventions which architectural drawings emerge from.

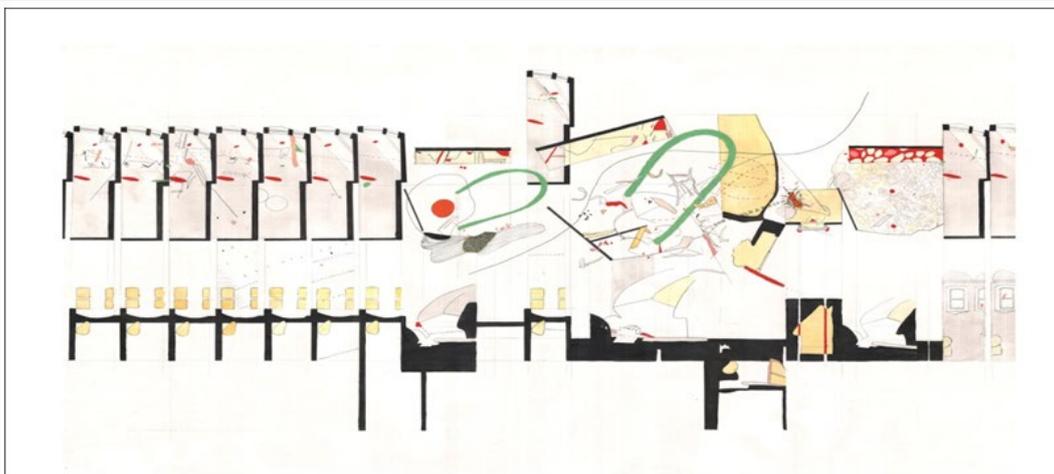


Figure 6: Events spill between plan and section. (Image by Author).

Public building

The next scale, provides a further opportunity to explore architecture's possible collaboration with non-human agents. To thread ideas together, a narrative with the Queen Bee(s) is continued. But, another non-human element was added—bread. Similar to the house, a conventional grounded building in plan/section/elevation was not the intended endpoint. Rather, the

aim was to convey the experience of human and nonhuman 'intra-actions' through a series of spatial moments [8]. This hybrid set of relations were explored through an extension to Wellington airport consisting of a sourdough hotel and apiary. The sourdough hotel is a programme provides a place for single people's sourdough cultures to be fed and looked after during time away from home. I began with a collaborative drawing with bread dough (Figure 7).



Figure 7: Collaboration with dough. (Image by Author).



Figure 8 & 9: Exploring intra-active scenarios. (Image by Author) (These are small images).

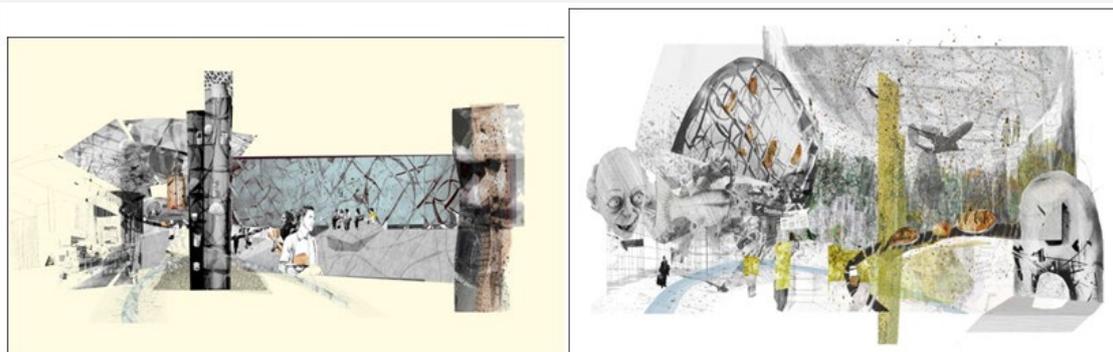


Figure 10 & 11: Spatial moments. (Image by Author).

The arrival and departure of the queen bees and bread were animated. The animation sequences brought out some different storylines and spatial qualities together in a – collaborative story. Scenarios of intra-action were explored through models and drawings; and, finally a composite of drawing and model which explored a possible scenography (Figure 8-11).

As a final design, which contextualizes the discussion around new materialism through animated ‘moments’ show an architectural assemblage of human and non-human elements that is convincing perhaps not in pragmatic resolve, but in alien spirit.

While I cannot know what it is like to be a bee? I have tried to question how the plan, section and elevation inherently exclude those who don't fit certain assumptions. So rather than retreating to anthropocentric, exclusionary practice, the project has worked to incorporate nonhuman agency. Finally, this project is a reminder, a humbling and important one - we shouldn't laud ourselves over anything else, or each other. And perhaps by saving the bees, we may save ourselves, by valuing the importance of becoming-with others for a flourishing world [9].



This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License
DOI: [10.19080/CTFTE.2018.03.555609](https://doi.org/10.19080/CTFTE.2018.03.555609)

References

1. Kleinman DL, Suryanarayanan S (2013) Dying Bees and the Social Production of Ignorance. *Science, Technology & Human Values* 38(4): 492-517.
2. Vanbergen AJ (2013) Threats to an Ecosystem Service: Pressures on Pollinators. *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment* 11(5): 251-259.
3. (2006) Bees Reared in Cities ‘Healthier’. BBC News, UK.
4. Jane Bennett (2010) *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press, USA, p. 60.
5. Ibid.
6. Lim CJ (2013) London Short Stories: Drawing Narratives. *Architectural Design* 83(5): 102-107.
7. Sarah Ensor (2012) *Spinster Ecology: Rachel Carson, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Non reproductive Futurity*. *American Literature* 84(2): 409-435.
8. Karan Barad K (2007) *Meeting the Universe Halfway*. Durham: Duke University Press, USA p. 89.
9. Haraway D (2016) *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Kindle Edition, Duke University Press, USA.

Your next submission with Juniper Publishers will reach you the below assets

- Quality Editorial service
- Swift Peer Review
- Reprints availability
- E-prints Service
- Manuscript Podcast for convenient understanding
- Global attainment for your research
- Manuscript accessibility in different formats
(Pdf, E-pub, Full Text, Audio)
- Unceasing customer service

Track the below URL for one-step submission
<https://juniperpublishers.com/online-submission.php>