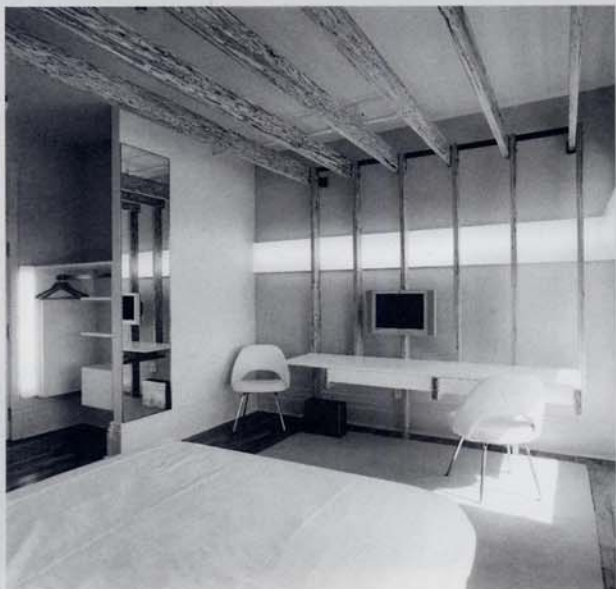


411 Offset: a room by Heather Dubbeldam and Tania Ursomarzo

Yam LAU



Le Corbusier once proposed for the Hôtel D'Orsay that a select number of rooms be 183 centimeters wide, similar in size to a ship cabin, or more accurately, a monk's cell. The architect believed that a hotel room should be a place for contemplation and recuperation. Such a sensibility certainly runs counter to what the travel industry promotes: the traveller's primary aim being to indulge in novel experiences that are, in fact, usually no more than trivial distractions from her daily life and responsibilities.

Le Corbusier's overt ascetic orientation aside, both the ship cabin and the monk's cell can be regarded as spatial expressions of that which is measured and restrained. That is, these limited spaces are manifestations of essential qualities—modesty, patience, precision, coherence—that may, if properly articulated, attune the traveller to contemplative thoughts. When designing a hotel room, the architect's task then is not to violate the essential freedom of thought and space, but simply to allow the space minimum and precise articulation, with the intention that the traveller's thoughts

and the space may be enfolded in the shared qualities of frugality, measure and grace.

I recently visited a series of hotel rooms designed by artists and architects at the Gladstone Hotel in Toronto. The Gladstone is an historic building that once marked the limit of the city, where the train used to stop in the last century. The Artist Designed Hotel Rooms are part of a larger effort to revive the hotel and integrate the site into the cultural fabric of its immediate and striving vicinity, as well as into the city as a whole.

Most of the rooms adopted a thematic approach, transforming but also delimiting the room into this or that persuasion or fantasy. In other words, the desire to provide the guests with extraordinary experiences required that the room itself be transcended, as if what was immanent were not enough and had to be displaced by outward enhancement in order to elevate the room into something else.

But there is an exception: *411 Offset*, by artist/architect team Heather Dubbeldam and Tania Ursomarzo, is primarily about giving architectural articulation to the room, releasing the expressive and experiential potential inherent in the architecture while simultane-

ously holding this potential in reserve. Their statement below offers a succinct account of their program.

"We have created two 'wrapping' architectural expressions that when combined, integrate all the programmatic components of the room. Floating within the existing restored Victorian shell, an element of skeletal construction wraps vertically around the space, supporting a floating bed plane, side tables and desk surface, while another plane wraps horizontally about the walls, referencing the window in the form of a continuous strip of light."¹

It is just as it is. A clear program, comprised of two distinct yet integrated gestures of wrapping that serve simultaneously as architectural elements and supports for furniture. The wrapping palpates the contour of the room, sensing and mobilizing the volume as it traces the room's surfaces. The "sense" of the room is coiled and uncoiled within the movement of wrapping. This continuous movement generates a "design" or a sense of order that appears to be immanent to, and not simply an imposition upon the room. Here everything is completely implicated into the space as one consistent and continuous gesture and

expression. The team's work is not about adding more to an empty room in an effort to make it "interesting." I would say that the team's program to offset the room neither enhances nor diminishes it. It simply returns the room to itself.

Nothing is extraneous here. All the elements are set into play following the same organizational principle. Nothing particular is put forward, only a feeling of an articulated movement that convinces me of the expressive quality and value of space. One thing not mentioned in the statement is that each of the walls is painted in a different, subtle shade of white. The shift in colour varied the tempo and sense of weight in the room. Yet it is so subtle that the viewer is initiated into this movement without "seeing" it, a move completely integrated into the overall schema of the room.

The team's program explores and maximizes the potentialities of the relatively small room. Yet one would be wrong to assume that these potentialities exist prior to their expressions. Rather, it is through the process of making that the room is mobilized according to its own terms. Composed and articulated, the room demonstrates the privilege and responsibility of the architectural process. It manifests the way such a process can situate the hotel room, however limited it may be, into a place of openness and opportunity. *411 Offset* delivers the room in its own terms; it demonstrates how a hotel room might nourish movement and promote thought. Thought dwells here. ←

411 Offset: a room by Heather Dubbeldam and Tania Ursomarzo
Gladstone Hotel, Toronto
Opened on 17 June 2005 (permanent installation)

NOTE

1. Excerpt from the artists' recent email to the author.

Yam LAU is an artist and writer based in Toronto. His painting explores the intersection between painting, architecture, and virtual space. He teaches painting at York University.

Heather DUBBELDAM and Tania URSOMARZO, *Room 411 Offset* at the Gladstone Hotel, 2005. PSL (parallel strand lumber) beams and posts, custom white acrylic light fixture, lacquer-finished millwork. Photos: Heather Dubbeldam, Gokche Erkan.