Placing Elsewhere:
Approaches for Physical and Digital *Flânerie*

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Abstract

This paper will discuss approaches and tools for physical and digital flânerie *that emerged within an RMIT second- and third-year Interior Design Studio, during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the third week of classes in March 2020, social distancing measures in Australia led us to transpose urban site-based student projects online. Though unforeseen, this was taken as an opportunity for the interior design studio to explicate modes of physical and digital* flânerie, *via meandering and looking. We discuss teaching and learning experiences within the digital classroom, which we discovered was a dynamic chat-scape of hyperlinks, fragments, displacements and delays. We discuss how we translated aspects of the philosopher Walter Benjamin's flaneur with reference to* The Arcades Project. *The paper is structured as a stroll through key discoveries and works and aims to explicate emerging frameworks for digital* flânerie *within the teaching and learning of interior design.*

Keywords: physical and digital flânerie, *digitally interfacing, interior design pedagogy, site-led design*

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Introduction

In March 2020, COVID-19 precipitated temporary university campus closures across Australian universities and in many parts of the world. In Australia, all universities introduced measures to either adapt physical classrooms, change the academic year, or restrict face-to-face teaching through remote, home-based classes via digital classrooms. Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology adopted a full transition to online delivery on March 24, 2020.

Within the RMIT Interior Design discipline,[1] discussions that had been underway for some time about the potential for interior design within the digital epoch were instantly and intimately foregrounded, leading us and many of our colleagues to wonder how discipline-specific learning and teaching could be translated from physical to digital environments and continue to provide rich and equitable idea and research led design potential. Foremost in our minds as design studio teachers was, how can the physical disruption and distractions of COVID-19 outbreak become a potential for teaching and learning? Further to this, how can we design student projects that encourage experimentation in response to unforeseen physical distancing?

This paper reflects upon how we approached these questions and the discoveries that were made, through reference to our second and third year Interior Design Studio *Placing Elsewhere*, which was initially designed for face-to-face delivery and then nuanced for online delivery. We discuss how we transposed the face-to-face content during COVID-19 pandemic, through site-responsive, process-led and adaptive design of student approaches and techniques.

Placing Elsewhere departed from the question posed by the journalist Bijan Stephen: "As we grow inexorably busier—due in large part to the influence of technology—might flânerie be due for a revival?" (Stephen, 2013, para. 2). In an article for *The Paris Review,* Stephen noted how 21st-century screen-based technologies create cultural pressure points that could be alleviated through a return to *flânerie. Flânerie* is a French word which translates as strolling and has been the subject of much academic and practice-based design research. The philosopher, Walter Benjamin, an early 20th-century flaneur who studied the arcades of Paris, wrote prolifically and collected ephemera about his observations. His eminent book *The*

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[1] See http://www.rmitinteriordesign.website/

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Arcades Project is a compendium of note-form *convolutes*[2] collected between 1927 and 1940. It features more than two hundred entries about flaneurs. Benjamin's flaneur was the wondering dreamer, who encountered the city of Paris through a heightened gaze, perceiving interior and landscape scales, parts within the whole, "the city splits for him into its dialectical poles. It opens up to him as a landscape, even as it closes around him as a room" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 880).

The design studio translated aspects of Benjamin's *flânerie* to encourage students to engage with the city through a meandering mode of strolling and looking. This enabled responsiveness to incidental site encounters at various scales and was a technique for studying interior design through the dynamics of depth and flatness, proximity and distance, distraction and attention. Students produced site-led spatial, material and visual compositions, through in-situ mapping, material testing, model-making, and 1:1 scale site-interventions. The context for these explorations was The Capitol, owned by RMIT and designed in 1924 by the American born Australian-based architects Marion Mahony and Walter Burley Griffin. Refurbished in 2019 by the Melbourne based Six Degrees Architects, the ground level arcade was adorned with glass and mirror, which prompted us to consider *flânerie* within the site in relation to Benjamin's ideas about the visual stimulation of reflective interior surfaces. In the *convolute* titled *Mirrors* in *The Arcades Project*, he wrote,

> the ambiguity of the arcades: their abundance of mirrors, which fabulously amplifies the spaces and makes orientation more difficult. For although this mirror world may have many aspects, indeed infinitely many, it remains ambiguous, double-edged (Benjamin, 1999, p. 542).

Similar interior conditions could be found above the arcade level, within the now 574 seat auditorium,[3] which was the site of investigation for a previous design studio and public student exhibition in 2019. Within this interior, the complex geometric plaster bas-relief and changing coloured LED lighting stimulated peripheral vision and decentralised attention from the proscenium and cinema screen, creating an immersive interior condition.

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[2] The term *convolute* means "something of a convoluted form." It was selected by the translators of *The Arcades Project*, over "folder, file, or sheaf" to describe the 36 study areas collected by Walter Benjamin between 1927 and 1940. The translators arrived at this term, through reference to the German term, *konvolut*, denoting "bundles of papers," which Benjamin's friend and philosopher Theo Adorno had posthumously used to describe his material, following Benjamin's death in 1940. Categorisation of convolutes was via alphabetical and numerical ordering.

[3] In 1924, at the time of construction, the theatre seated 2137 guests. See http://thecapitol.rmit.edu.au

Figure 1
Interior
auditorium view,
The Capitol, RMIT,
2020 (Photograph
by Tatjana Plitt)

The architects, critics and educators Libero Andreotti and Nadir Lahiji have discussed the effects of visual stimulation in relation to the *decentring* and *disconcerting effects* of the so-called *hyper-mediated city*. In their book *The Architecture of Phantasmagoria: Specters of the City*, published in 2016, they advance Benjamin's critique of over-stimulation caused by media, politics and technology within the modern city, by suggesting that the city—as a mediator of those phenomena—heightens this stimulation (Andreotti & Lahiji 2016, p. 145). *Placing Elsewhere* considered how visual distraction and attention, stemming from material and digital interfaces were tied to fleeting experiences that occur while walking.

The design studio aims outlined above were partly stimulated by our shared focus on site-led design studios, which we had been developing over two previous semesters through teaching regularly off-campus and using the city as our classroom to address modes of interior and interiority within Melbourne. These teaching approaches led to student projects, which were informed and iterated by meandering and responding to chance encounters within the city. With the onset of COVID-19, these methodologies equipped us to continue meandering, within the physical disruptions and distracted states of learning that the crisis produced. When we

began developing our studio brief in response to Bijan Stephen's provocation to give *flânerie* a "come back," we did not foresee that by the third week of classes, our design studio would become entirely mediated via screens. Students were literally *placed elsewhere*—off-campus and online. Therefore, it became necessary for them to transpose the urban site research into their domestic and digital settings, prompting us to ask, how can students meander from the confines of physical rooms across, beyond and through virtual windows, via digital *flânerie*?

Figure 2
Untitled, 1:1 site based investigation, Ziqi Cao, Yihan Hu, Jifeng Shi, Placing Elsewhere, 2020 (Photograph by Jifeng Shi)

This paper attempts to illustrate selected approaches and techniques, which were developed during and in response to COVID-19 outbreak, to allow students to continue to practice *flânerie* within their domestic locations, using physical computer screens and digital applications as *sites*.

The paper is in three parts. **Part One: Remote Access** examines how we have understood *flânerie* as a physical and imaginative practice, within the home. We discuss prescribed functions within the digital room and how they have presented opportunities for exchange between physical and digital *flânerie*. **Part Two: Share Screen**, discusses a selection of site-led approaches that were explored via physical and virtual interfaces. It presents a discussion about the *flânerie* of looking and moving through, across and beyond[4] glass retail frontages and, we suggest, digital screens. **Part**

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[4] The terms "through, across and beyond" are from Latin, *Transparency*, a conjugation of *trans* (meaning across, over, beyond) + *parere* (meaning come in sight, appear).

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Three: Chat-scapes, Hyperlinks and Web[sites] discusses how selected functions within the digital application extended beyond the simulation of a physical classroom to enable exchange between the physical and digital room and extend flânerie as a teaching and learning process. It presents excerpts from our in-class chat-bubble conversations and discusses how they performed as *convolutes*, while extending the tutorial discussions beyond "a *here* and a *there*" (de Certeau, 1984, p. 99), via hyperlinks and virtual *fly-outs* that connect to vast networks of information.

This paper is positioned in relation to our collaborative interior design studio teaching. We are not theorists, nor experts on Walter Benjamin or online pedagogy. However, aspects of Benjamin's practice outlined within *The Arcades Project*, and via Stephen and others have enabled us to develop the studio provocation from *Placing Elsewhere* into a framework of exchange between physical and digital *flânerie*. The aim of this paper is to meander through the key approaches and techniques, via a reflection on the interior design studio *Placing Elsewhere*. Our aim is to explicate emerging frameworks for digital *flânerie* within the teaching and learning of interior design.
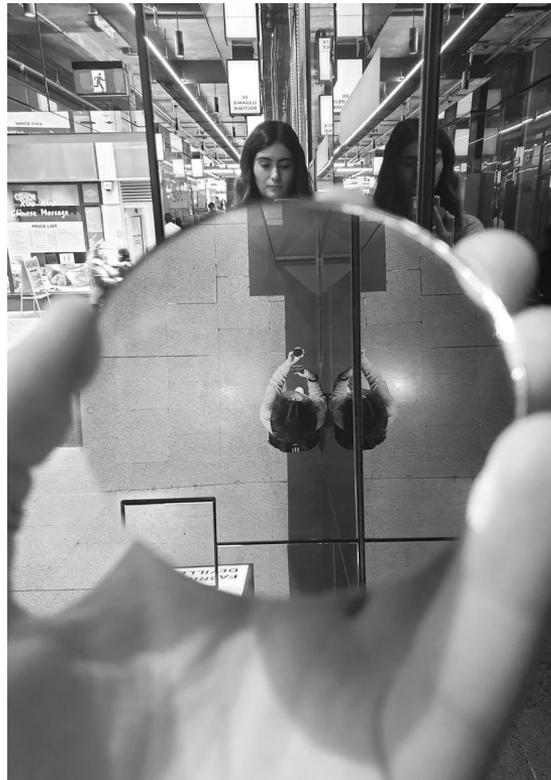

Figure 3
Perplexed Perception, 1:1 site exploration, Jessica Said, *Placing Elsewhere,* 2020 (Photograph by Jessica Said)

Part One: Remote Access

> So, the flaneur goes for a walk in his room: 'When Johannes sometimes asked for permission to go out, it was usually denied him. But on occasion his father proposed as a substitute, that they walk up and down the room hand in hand**.** That seemed at first a poor substitute, but in fact... something quite novel awaited him' (Benjamin, 1999, p. 421)

Australia's smallest mainland state, Victoria invoked State of Emergency legislation on March 16, 2020. This event instantiated a sudden shift from physical classes to home-based learning. We met with our students synchronously, via screens, yet were physically distanced from each other. This led us to consider how *flânerie* could be studied within the home. The quote above was entered as a convolute, under the heading *Flaneur*, in Walter Benjamin's book, *The Arcades Project*. Benjamin discovered it in a biography written in 1929 by the German theologian Eduard Gieseman. Within the design studio, the point of interest was how Benjamin conceptualised the physical *room* as a site of imaginative *flânerie*. The final sentence within the convolute references this interest through a travelogue translated from French to English in 1871, titled *A Journey Round My Room*. This book had been written in 1794 by an imprisoned army major general, Xavier de Maistre from his cell in Turin. It journaled his actual orientation within the cell, as well as his imaginative wonderings, which were metaphysical and multi-directional in nature: "Hence when I travel my room, I seldom keep to a straight line," he wrote (Atwell, 1871, p. 14). Clearly, when de Maistre wrote his journal, there was no internet, but this notion of multi-directionality is one of the hallmarks of today's digital networks, how, then could this be used as a mode of *flânerie* between the physical and digital room?

The project *Remote Access* asked students to design a speculative relational process, system or infrastructure to open their rooms out to intercept with the cosmos. They were asked to develop a composite of physical and digital *flânerie*, facilitated through a selection of design approaches and techniques within their rooms, and within the digital application. They were asked to define the parameters of this opening out as a physical and digital condition; was it generated by the view through a window, the porosity of a wall, the extension of a passage or the infrastructural networks running through and beyond their homes; was it social, technological, atmospheric or subterranean? Our aims within the following sections are not to describe student outcomes to this project, but rather to capture selected approaches and techniques that allowed experimentation

with the site and technology at hand. We begin by mapping the digital room and the physical screen interface to demonstrate how they facilitated techniques, which could be understood as digital *flânerie*.
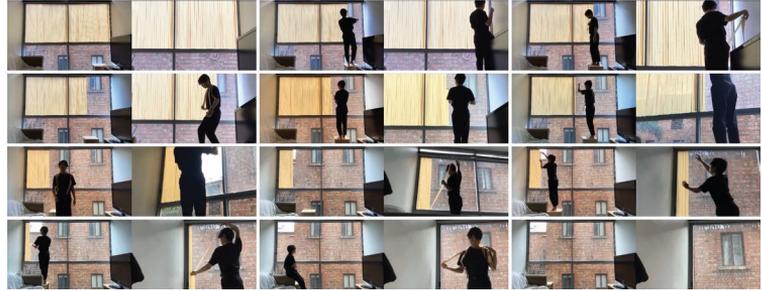
Part Two: Share Screen

Remote Access, the title of the student project outlined above, was a reference to the online infrastructure of the same name that describes the ability to connect with others through virtual application windows from far off locations; to virtually narrow distance. 'Remote' is an adjective that stems from the Latin *removere* or remove and suggests taking away from an original source or creating distance. By contrast, *access* stems from the Latin verb *to approach*, or to create nearness. This highlights the peculiar capacity of online technology to entangle the near and distant, flat and deep in an instant. In her book *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft*, Professor Anne Friedberg theorises visual access to digital applications, through the screen, as "virtual windows" (Friedberg, 2009, p. 1). Within the design studio, her notion of a "windowed elsewhere" (p. 243), was translated to reconcile exchanges between home and the cosmos, as mediated through the physical screen and its connection to a network (Friedberg, 2009, p. 243). While it would have been possible to transition the design studio to an entirely digital mode of designing, through existing online modelling or virtual layout software, for instance, or to use the digital room as a simulacrum of the physical classroom, our interest was in how an alternative interaction with the digital room, as a site, could be developed through *flânerie*.

Technique 01: Interacting with[in] the digital room

> Click Join Session, allow audio, allow video, welcome, you're the only one in the room, say something.

> Attendee XX joining session.

Can you hear me? Can you see me?

Yes, I can hear and see you.[5]

Above we have presented the prescribed entry sequence into the digital classroom, which teaching and learning occurred within. It illustrates how the term *room* within the digital application infers the spatial and programmatic conditions of a physical classroom. The entry sequence is akin to entering an actual space; however, unlike encountering one another in a physical room, the digital room was a site of aural and visual absences, delays and displacements, as *attendees* arrived and left the room. Audio and mute functions could be switched on and off and created a communication lag between speaker and responder. These glitch-like lags resembled the fleeting visual stimuli of the "hyper-mediated city" (Andreotti & Lahiji, 2016, p. 145) and Benjamin's notion of "phantasmagoria" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 14) before it. This led us to wonder, how might collective fleeting conditions be understood as techniques and effects of digital *flânerie*? According to the German literature professor Sigrid Weigel, Walter Benjamin developed an epistemology of "simultaneity and constellation over continuity…fractionary over the whole" *(*Weigel, 2015, p. 345). The digital room permitted simultaneous and novel overlapping of learning and teaching within domestic interiors, it also revealed temporal lags, giving rise to a-synchronicity and complex spatial relationships.
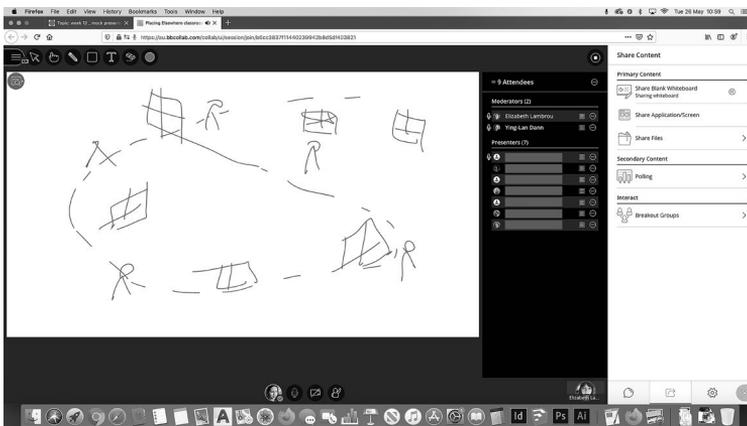

Figure 5
Windowed elsewhere diagram produced in the online classroom, *Placing Elsewhere,* 2020, (Screenshot by authors)

We shall now examine how these effects appeared within the design studio, by way of looking and moving through, across and beyond *windowed elsewheres* and mirrored and glass retail frontages within The Capitol arcade, where our urban *flânerie* initially commenced.

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[5] This excerpt is taken from the beginning of a digital classroom conversation between the authors in April 2020.

We address this through reference to a specific in-situ mapping project, which, as a technique, enabled students to find and articulate multiple conditions within a single field of vision. This revealed a mode of visual exchange, communication and collaboration and informed how we came to understand and translate the prescribed *Share Screen* function within the digital room.

Technique 02: Glass as a site of exchange

The Capitol, introduced at the beginning of this paper, was utilised as a site of learning, prior to the online shift. Students had been asked to read excerpts of *The Arcades Project* within the mirrored ground floor arcade interior and to adopt the personae of Benjamin—to become flaneurs—with a focus on looking through and moving past the vacant retail shopfronts within the newly refurbished, but still untenanted arcade. Within the arcade network surrounding The Capitol, the interplay of the mirror and empty glass frontages created peripheral spectacles, as sunlight travelled obliquely from the exterior, through multiple shopfronts, into the interior. This interplay, mediated by windows, became the site of their mappings, which appropriated the vernacular of hand-written retail signwriting and used the empty retail facades as drawing surfaces. Small groups of two to three students situated themselves in relation to an empty shopfront, so that they could see, but not speak with each other. Using sheets of transparent acetate adhered over the glass, they developed mappings to communicate through the visual depth of the vacant shopfronts. This process of mapping sought to harness the fleeting visual conditions occurring on and through the glass, while also using windows as a collaborative interface. It illustrated how multiple vantage points are communicated and perceived through interfaces and peripheral modes of looking and meandering.

Figure 6
Tracing Distortion, site-based 1:1 drawing over glass, Aung Khoung Myat, *Placing Elsewhere,* 2020 (Photographs by Aung Khoung Myat)

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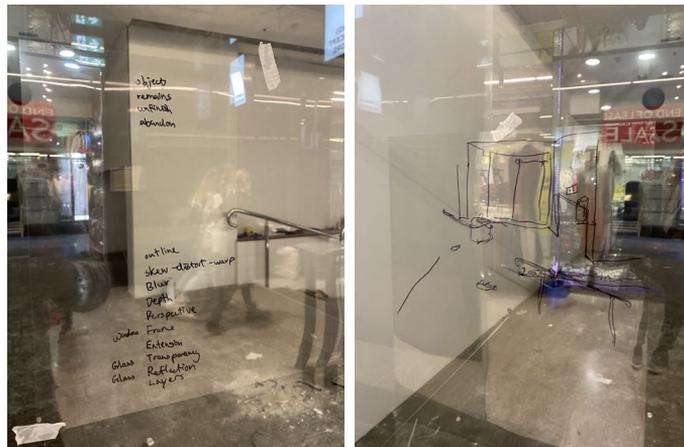
Technique 03: Share screen

With the COVID-19 lockdown, students were restricted to their homes and exclusively communicating with the class via the digital room. The *Share Screen* function was a tool within the digital classroom that permitted individual students to upload their design work and process and share with the class. Based on the interface mappings above, we considered how *Share Screen* could be used as both a communication tool and as a material interface. In many cases, limited access to formal art materials and printing services meant that design processes, including model-making and drawing, became entirely mediated by the screen. As a digital iteration of the preliminary trace mappings, students were asked to draw with baking paper and clear plastic layered over computer screens, as substitutes for a transparency sheet. These layers were used both for mapping conditions within the physical and digital room simultaneously and as iterative surfaces. Works were then photographed on mobile devices, uploaded to the digital classroom and communicated to the class via the *Share Screen* function. This hybrid physical and digital process dislocated the mappings from their original physical sites of production, by mirroring them back through the digital room into the home, giving rise to a sense of temporal and spatial dislocation. Screen backlighting reinforced the conditions which were present in the arcade mappings, contributing to an illusion of physical and digital depth.

Figure 7
Rounding the Corner, screen overlay mapping, Shengjie He, *Placing Elsewhere,* 2020 (Photograph by Shengjie He)

Technique 04: Split Screen

The *Share Screen* mappings above were an iterative means to develop practices from the physical arcade glass frontages as a mode of digital *flânerie*. These enquiries were expanded through the introduction of the split screen, as a concept and technique to communicate and synthesise design processes and immersive conditions of a project simultaneously, via an audio-visual essay. Students were introduced to video essay processes via the work, *House Arrest* (2015) by the film-maker and critical theorist, Domietta Torlascos. In the essay, she uses a split screen to show simultaneous vantage points of inside and outside, mediated by the frame of a window and sheer curtain, in relation to critical text interspersed as captions throughout the essay. The dynamic interplay between text and spatial imagery recalled the arcade mappings and allowed students to experiment with proximity and direction via moving image, and critical writing within a screen-based interface.

In Part Two: *Share Screen*, we have discussed techniques for looking through and engaging with the physical site of the screen and digital room and examined how these have allowed students of *Placing Elsewhere* to study and interact with synchronous and asynchronous conditions of near and far, flatness and depth. We shall now discuss how we developed the prescribed functions within the digital room, as tools to further enunciate a site that digital *flânerie* could emerge within.

Figure 8
Amplify, framing observations from the site of home, Nathan Ng, *Placing Elsewhere,* 2020 (Photograph by Nathan Ng)

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Part Three: Chat-scapes, Hyperlinks and Web[sites]

At the beginning of this paper, we touched on how our collaborative teaching practice uses meandering and looking, as modes of *flânerie* to encounter and respond within sites. In the following sections, we explore how the digital room has extended beyond simulation of the physical classroom, through the translation of *flânerie*, as an interior teaching and learning approach. In the previous two sections, we discussed *flânerie*, in relation to physical and virtual windows. Now we shall focus on the digital room, as an application and present excerpts from our in-class chat-bubble conversations to discuss how they extended the *site* beyond *here* and *there* via hyperlinks and web[sites].
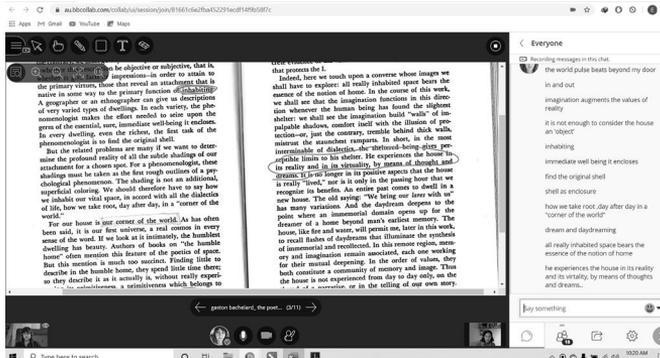
Figure 9
Real-time close reading within the digital classroom, *Placing Elsewhere,* 2020 (Screenshot by authors)

Technique 05: Chat-scapes and hyperlinks

In his 1984 book, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, the philosopher Michel de Certeau included a chapter about walking, which identified a correspondence between walking and speech. He wrote that with each step taken, "both a near and a far, a here and a there" are enunciated (de Certeau, 1984, p. 99). Within *Placing Elsewhere*, the notion of *here* and *there* was complicated by the fact that there was no fixed online location for a *here* and *there* to correspond with and the physical rooms, where students were positioned, were deliberately not enunciated for the sake of student privacy. We became interested in how the chat function became a technique for enunciating *here* and *there* by allowing us to write and magnify certain key ideas, emerging during our discussions. The chat box, situated on the periphery of the screen, enabled speech to be simultaneously filtered and key moments of a discussion brought in and out of focus via group and direct messages, hyperlinks, and fly-outs. As a spatial condition, this allowed us to visually scan across multiple ideas synchronously in a manner that was akin to the visual experiences of The Capitol arcade.

10:13 AM

the world pulse beats beyond my door

10:13 AM

in and out

10:14 AM

imagination augments the values of reality

10:15 AM

it is not enough to consider the house an 'object'

10:15 AM

inhabiting

10:16 AM

immediate wellbeing it encloses

10:16 AM

find the original shell

10:16 AM

shell as enclosure

10:17 AM

how we take root day after day in a "corner of the world"

10:18 AM

dream and daydreaming

10:19 AM

all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home

10:20 AM

he experiences the house in its reality and its virtuality, by means of thoughts and dreams

10:21 AM

how do you read your home as...flashes of images and moments of intensity

10:24 AM

it is both cell and world

10:25 AM

it is diaphanous

It grows and spreads so that in order to live in.

Figure 10
Chat conversation excerpt, containing extracted quotations from *The Poetics of Space* by Gaston Bachelard (2014), *Placing Elsewhere,* 2020 (Image by authors)

Technique 06: Web[sites]

In the section above we outline how classroom discussions were highlighted and extended upon through hyperlinks within the chat function, allowing digital *flânerie* of moving across and through the internet, which can be likened to the perceived visual experiences of an arcade. Over the duration of the semester, students established web[sites] to incrementally archive their design processes, through a categorising system of tagging and curating multi-directional lines of enquiry within their work. Rather than using the web[site] as a static archive, it became a site of digital encounters and iterations. Engaging with websites in this way allowed students to communicate and mobilize non-linear pathways through their design work. These

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pathways were augmented through verbal presentations, which *enunciated* key moments within the works undertaken, and in turn, identified loci within the digital room. Presenting through websites enabled students to critically loop forwards and backwards through the web[site], to identify design opportunities within a framework of digital *flânerie.*

End Session

At the beginning of this paper, we set out to explore a series of questions, relating to *flânerie*; could it be the panacea to our online lives, might it be due for a revival, as Bijan Stephen (2013) wrote? Further to this, we asked how can the physical disruptions and distractions of COVID-19 extend potentials for teaching and learning; how can we design student projects that encourage experimentation in response to unfixed situations and finally, how can we extend interior experiences across, beyond and through interfaced windows, via physical and digital *flânerie*? Following the unprecedented, widespread use of online technology for teaching and learning during this period, it is illuminating to reflect upon what modes of interiority have been produced. The techniques and approaches discussed within this paper have presented frameworks for translating physical site-led design responses online. Furthermore, they offer learnings for interiority, pedagogy and digital *flânerie.*

Digital flânerie

The technological development of glass and steel in the early 20th century enabled narrow Parisian thoroughfares to become enclosed pedestrian arcades, presenting new modes of urban experience through meandering, physical and visual access. As we learned, through Xavier de Maistre's travelogue, imaginative *flânerie* can be heightened within the domestic realm, and in a more recent example the architect and academic Mark Wigley has written about architectural journeys that "The gift of the architect is to produce a sense of departure even at home" (Wigley, 2011, p. 212). *Remote Access*, the final student brief, highlighted how the intersection of localised site knowledge with digital networked technologies extends upon these existing modes of *flânerie* and gives rise to the question: How is the post COVID-19 city experienced and how can urban interiors be accessed and activated remotely and via digital networks, or indeed via digital arcades?

Figure 11
Dust, intercepting the cosmos diagram, Irene PuiPui Li, *Placing Elsewhere,* 2020 (Photograph by Irene PuiPui Li)
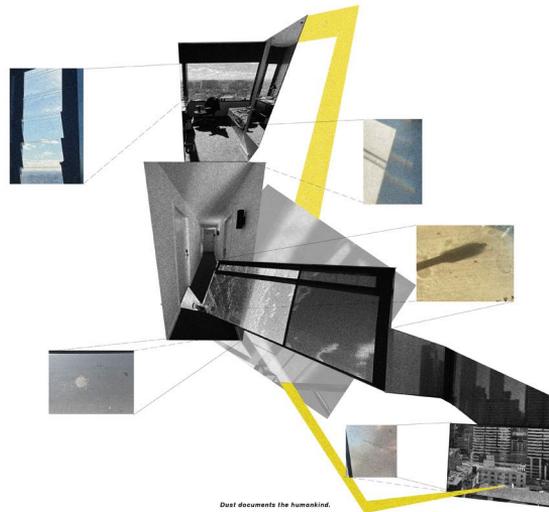
Digitally interfacing interior pedagogy

Placing Elsewhere has been a vehicle for testing the robustness of site and encounter-led interior pedagogy in this digitally interfacing epoch. If physical *flânerie* is a technique for encountering seen and unseen materiality within urban interiors, imaginative and digital flânerie presents mobile modes of interiority that are simultaneously unfixed, dislocated and overlaid, revealing malleable and extensible site conditions to encounter. *Flânerie* was used to navigate the digital room as an *interior site* rather than a simulacrum of a physical classroom. This presents the possibility for hybrid interior design learning experiences, neither exclusively physical nor virtual.

In the introduction to this paper, we discussed our use of the city, as a tool to access modes of interior and interiority through meandering, as alternatives to campus-based learning. With COVID-19 outbreak, learning was further dislocated from the campus via both physical distance and temporal lags. Learning was relocated into the site of the home and its situation within the digital network. At the time of writing, as RMIT Interior Design students continue the academic year online, there are warnings of rising COVID-19 cases globally, and localised lockdowns have resumed within the state of Victoria. These events sharpen the possibility that counter to our initial studio aims, physical *flânerie* may, in fact, continue to be on hold, highlighting the relevance and ongoing significance of this area of interior design pedagogy and the emergence of hybridised modes of digitally interfacing interiority.

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