

Ritual Traces on Architectural Elements

Inspired by one sentence from Bill Bryson about ‘setting’: *“Houses are quite odd things. They have almost no universally defining qualities: they can be of practically any shape, incorporate virtually any material, be of almost any size. Yet wherever we go in the world we know houses and recognize domesticity the moment we see them.”*¹

I had a similar experience when I paid a visit to Huis Dedel. It was firstly built for the Dedel family, then possessed by several different bourgeois families, it has mostly served as a private residential space, but also has been used as a public bookshop. Due to the variety of different owners and usages, its interior facade has been a splendid Collage: For instance, in the living room, things from the different period are combined: golden leaves shine under the dingy light, delicate Japanese wallpaper with industrial lighting tubes crawling on it, fully decorated stucco ceiling attached with cigarette ashes...even though the information that the architectural elements gave me can be quite random, I already caught the sense of domesticity there, especially the bourgeois family atmosphere.

Based on my personal experience, I believe rituals play a great role in shaping the recognition of domestic spaces. Under some circumstances, rituals would leave traces on architectural elements, or even decide the architectural design, like the artificial water pump in Huis Dedel’s dining room: when the family was ready to dine, the



Artificial water pump in the dining room, water comes from the servants outside. [image 1]

¹ Bill, B. (2010). *At Home, A Short History of Private Life*. London: Transworld Publishers, pp.35-36.

pump together with servants ensured that the ‘ceremony’ was carried out in an orderly and elegant manner, even though building it can cost far more than its practical function, hundreds of years later, we are no longer to see how servants serve the family, but from the water pump, we can still grasp the scene. Now the house is determined to open for the public as a design museum, I believe its architectural value should be part of the museum as well. By reinforcing ritual traces of domesticity as a key, I hope to arise curiosity for the public to explore the house. In this essay, firstly I will introduce some cases from one book about rituals and show how those rituals shape architectural elements. Then I will turn to architectural research from a TV series, showing how the built environment reflects on social factors behind it.

I choose *‘Daily rituals: How artists work?’* edited by Mason Currey for the ritual case study. As the book’s name implies, it is about how artists used rituals to work, some of the rituals have interesting relation with architectural components:



Jane Austen. [image 2]

Jane Austen (1775 –1817) was an English novelist known primarily for her six major novels, including *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814) and *Emma* (1816). She was born in an intellectual family and has always been home educated, after 1786, she *“never again lived anywhere beyond the bounds of her immediate family environment”*². She finished almost all her works in her house, as described in the book, *“There was, between the front door and the offices, a swing door which creaked when it was opened; but she objected to having this little inconvenience remedied because it gave her notice when anyone was coming.”*³

² Le Faye (2004), 52

³ Mason, C. (2013). *Daily Rituals-How Artists Work*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, pp.35

From Jane Austen's case, ritual traces on architectural elements don't seem to be necessarily tangible or visible, instead, it is for hearing. I assume that rituals can probably be achieved by smelling, tasting, or even hurting, In this way, I will examine Huis Dedel with a broader vision.



Hallway door window [image 3]



Hallway door window [image 4]

This draws my attention to the hallway door windows on the ground floor: especially the door dividing the entrance hall and the staircase. The door is equipped with a high window, through which it is only possible to tell if the room is being used. I assume it might also relate to the sign of 'No disturbing', for the reason that the door also serves to separate the servants and the hosts.



William Faulkner [image 5]

William Cuthbert Faulkner (1897-1962) was an American writer and Nobel Prize laureate from Oxford, Mississippi. *'He is primarily known for his novels and short stories set in the fictional Yoknapatawpha County, based on Lafayette County, Mississippi, where he spent most of his life.'*⁴ In the Lafayette County, as described in the book: *'This was 1929. In the summer of 1930, the Faulkners purchased a large, dilapidated family estate, and Faulkner quit his job in order to repair the house and grounds. Then he would wake early, eat breakfast, and write at his desk all morning. (Faulkner liked to work in the library, and since the library door had no lock, he would remove the doorknob and take it with him.)'*⁵

⁴ Obituary *Variety*, July 11, 1962.

⁵ Mason, C. (2013). *Daily Rituals-How Artists Work*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, pp.63

Compared with Jane Austen, William Cuthbert Faulkner isolated the library from the rest of the house, making his working time and space purer and more specialized. It reminds me that the Palace of Versailles did not install toilets until 1768⁶, At that time, the upper class could use the poop chair to relieve in a private room, while the rest could only use the public corners of the palace. By isolating oneself from others, ordinary physiological activities become more private and ritual: *'The first flushing toilet was created by Queen Elizabeth I's Godson. She had many godchildren who tried to impress her. This particular godson creating a flushing toilet just for her. She used it once, and it made such a loud noise, she could not stand having it in her own room. She didn't want people to know or hear when she was relieving herself!'*⁷ The lack of toilets makes the Palace of Versailles somehow cute in a paranoid way. So does Huis Dedel, it is not equipped with any toilet room, but the 'poop chair'.



'Poop Chair' of Huis Dedel [image 6]

I don't think relieving in a private room can be seen as a typical ritual, but from the example of William Cuthbert Faulkner, I believe isolating specific activities from daily behaviors does contribute to a ritual sense. If I take it as a design tool, it can be quite useful.

Newell Convers Wyeth (1882-1945) was an American artist and illustrator, normally he worked in his studio in the countryside, *"If the work wasn't going well, Wyeth would tape a piece of cardboard to the side of his glasses, blocking his view of the*

⁶ Louise Boisen S. (2014). *This is Versailles*. [This is Versailles: The Lack of Toilets. thisisversaillesmadame.blogspot.com](https://thisisversaillesmadame.blogspot.com). Accessed 17th Jan 2021

⁷ *The Toilets (Or Lack Of) Of Versailles*. (2014). <https://lifeoftheroyals.wordpress.com/2014/08/04/the-toilets-or-lack-of-of-versailles>. Accessed 17th Jan 2021

studio's large north window in an effort to improve his concentration. When he broke for lunch at 1:00, he would sometimes forget to remove this makeshift blinder—a sure sign to his family that the work was going poorly and he would be in a bad temper.”⁸

Wyeth has not changed his workplace but has made visual adjustments to the architectural space, so the ritual can also be a special perspective. Although it is indeed related to architectural elements, it does not necessarily leave traces.



N. C. Wyeth's Studio [image 7]

Compared with William Cuthbert Faulkner's ritual, Wyeth's ritual shares a similarity in isolation. Wyeth counted the built environment as a disturbing factor, while Faulkner's ritual deals more with disturbance from family members. It inspired me that if I use isolation as a tool to show the sense of ritual, then I need to first think about what needs to be isolated most.

Secondly, I turned to the TV series "Downton Abbey": *'The series, set in the fictional Yorkshire country estate of Downton Abbey between 1912 and 1926, depicts the lives of the aristocratic Crawley family and their domestic servants in the post-Edwardian era—with the great events of the time having an effect on their lives and on the British social hierarchy'*⁹. My main interest lies in the layout of the house. It has a strong contrast between the upper class and the working class, leaving me with an impression like Huis Dedel. Through this case study, I hope to better learn the actual state of contrast between the two classes, in order to have a deeper

⁸ Mason, C. (2013). *Daily Rituals-How Artists Work*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, pp.179

⁹ [Downton Abbey - Wikipedia](#). Assessed 18th Jan 2021.

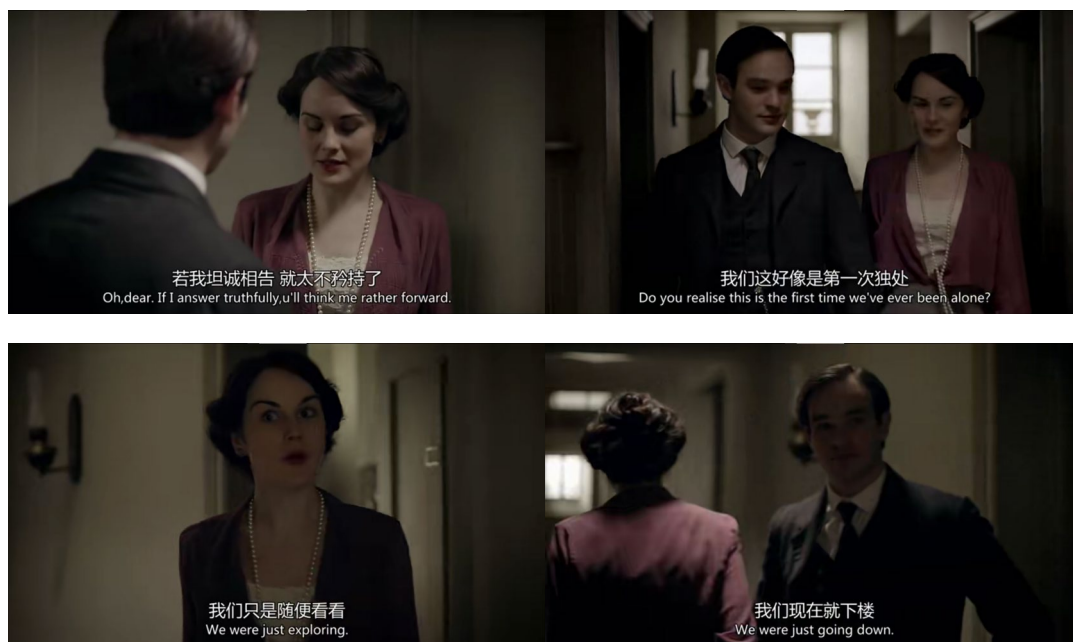
understanding of the details in Huis Dedel (especially in the dining hall, where two classes meet together).

The screenshots of the series show Lady Mary's proposal to go on a house tour with The Duke, who may become a fiancé. She naturally proposed to start with the oldest hall, but The Duke seemed to be particularly interested in "secret passage", which meant the passage of servants. The most interesting part was when Lady Mary was about to tell her mother about his special request, The Duke refused to tell her mother because he didn't want them to be disturbed, and they both acquiesced to each other with a tacit smile as the end of the clip.



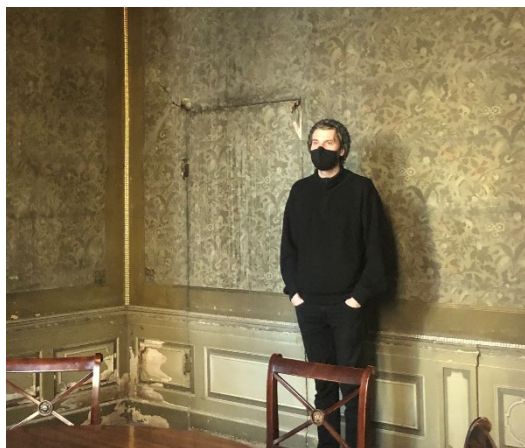
When Lady Mary stepped on a tour alone with The Duke [image 8]

I take Mary's smile and acquiescence to imply a desire to be alone with The Duke, which is reflected in the next episode: when she was spotted with the Duke in the servants' passage, she quickly made an excuse to escape. I think she treats the servants' passage in the same way as she treats her hidden desire for love: hidden, unspeakable, unnecessary.



When Lady Mary and The Duke caught by a servant [image 9]

In Huis Dedel's dining room, the servants' service access and the pump are perfectly concealed under the wallpaper, unlike the door through which the master enters. For all the rituals that take place in the restaurant: such as family gatherings or meetings with guests, the servants are subjectively ignored, even though they are participants.



Servants' access of the dining room [image 10]



Masters' access and pump of the dining room [image 11]

Back to my goal for the design: The structure of architectural space is the basic place where all rituals take place, and rituals can be personal. Hence, respecting the basic structure of the architectural space is necessary to me, while replicating the rituals of the building's past is not.