

Project Details

Designer:	Penelope Haralambidou
Title:	Déjà vu: Restaging Resnais's Last Year at Marienbad
Output type:	Artefact
Exhibition:	<i>Speculative Models: Air Grid and The Blossoming of Perspective</i>
Venue:	London Gallery West
Curator:	Michael Mazière, London Gallery West and Ambika P3
Dates:	22 April – 17 May 2009
Funding:	UCL £6,680; London Gallery West £2,430
Budget:	Exhibition budget total £15,110
Co-exhibitor:	Victoria Watson, University of Westminster





Statement about the Research Content and Process

Description

The artefact, *Déjà vu: Restaging Resnais's Last Year at Marienbad*, is a critical reading of Alain Resnais's 1961 film *Last Year at Marienbad* based on Alain Robbe-Grillet's screenplay. This large architectural model interprets the physical and psychological spaces in the film, and incorporates a digital animation projected onto the model. The artefact was presented at *Speculative Models*, a two-person exhibition at London Gallery West, in 2009.

Questions

- 1. How do critical forms of design-led practice (drawing, model-making and digital film) blur the boundaries between architectural design and theory?**
- 2. How can an architectural model present a critical reading of Resnais's film?**
- 3. How do representational techniques which combine a physical artefact with a digital projection generate and capture architectural ideas and design?**
- 4. What are the technical considerations of working with projected light and narrative as architectural drawing?**

Methods

The work derives from interdisciplinary enquiry involving architectural design, model-making and digital film techniques, architectural history and theory, film theory and critical theory:

- 1. Iterative and written analysis of the spatial arrangement of the film itself and from related literature.**
- 2. Investigation into the connections between space, memory (or amnesia), imagination and desire in architecture and psychology.**
- 3. Architectural historical research of Baroque and Rococo architecture in Munich, used as setting for the film.**
- 4. Design of a new interpretative artefact, incorporating a digital film projection onto a 3D model.**

Dissemination

The artefact has been reviewed in the *Journal of Architecture*. It has been the subject matter of a gallery talk; three invited seminars/workshops; and one international lecture. It is discussed in an essay for the *KTHA*, the journal of the KTH, Stockholm.



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Alain Resnais, Last year at Marienbad (1961) Astor pictures

3 (overleaf)
View of the screens from the back, showing the light of the projection seeping through the paper

Introduction

Déjà vu: Restaging Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad* (2009) is an artefact which performs an analysis of Alain Resnais's enigmatic film *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), based on a screenplay by Alain Robbe-Grillet. [fig. 1] The film takes place in a labyrinthine baroque hotel, where X, the male protagonist, meets A, the female protagonist, and confronts her with descriptions of their romantic involvement a year ago, of which she has no recollection. A third protagonist M may or may not be A's husband. A riddle of seduction, the narrative of the film flips between present and past, memory and imagination, and has been described as a love story, abstract thriller or philosophical puzzle. Although it received mixed reviews, the film was winner of the Golden Lion award at the 1961 Venice Film Festival. [fig. 2]

Déjà vu is an abstract paper model of the Baroque hotel, and a digital reworking of selected scenes specifically designed to be projected on the model, thus 'redrawing' the film in light. [fig. 4 & 5]

The three-dimensional arrangement of the hotel 'rooms', made from drawn, cut and folded paper, breaks the flatness of the single screen and the linearity of the film. Its simplicity reflects the elliptical storyline of Alain Robbe-Grillet's screenplay in contrast to the ornate setting. Placed on a table, the model dressed with the luminous imagery of the film, allows the viewer to circulate around and behind it and occupy this expansion of the picture plane at an intimate level.

The project investigates the film's spatial arrangement; how the narrative links architecture to memory, imagination and desire; the significance of the contrast between the ornate setting and the minimalist narrative; and the portrayal of the architecture as one of the protagonists. [fig. 3]

Resnais's film is notoriously enigmatic, addressing the audience as a riddle. Drawn by the unresolved riddle of the film's *mise en scène*, the project aims to unravel the visual organisation of clues and proposes an allegorical architecture: a paper 'model' displaying scenes within metaphorical 'rooms' of the Baroque hotel. It 'remodels' the film as a series of rooms, numbered below in order of appearance:

Room 1: right screen: surrounds a game of nim, a central repeated motif in the film; performed here with matches on a circular table accentuating the geometrical composition. [fig. 7]

Room 2: left screen; contains a theatre stage within the film, where actors perform the same narrative, locking the plot in *mise en abyme*. The scene is presented repeatedly as a loop, the theatre curtain constantly closing and opening. [fig.8]







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Room 3: central folded screen: the scanning views of the ornamental ceilings and receding corridors of the hotel. The camera, an eye scanning the elaborate Baroque architecture, is often in motion in contrast to the protagonists who seem trapped. [fig. 9]

Rooms 4, 5, 6: close-ups of the faces of the three protagonists, A, X and M, appear projected on three separate wooden blocks resembling pawns. [fig. 10]

Room 7: horizontal projection on the front of the table, the equivalent of the garden of the hotel, showing the famous scene with the painted elongated shadows. [fig. 11]

Room 8: long screen on a plinth at the back presents the two facing sides of the 'blossoming' bedroom, where an important but enigmatic incident takes place, which might hold the key to the mystery. [fig. 12]

Aims and Objectives

The artefact aimed to address the role of the model as a representational tool in architectural design, practice and education. My co-exhibitor and I developed this exhibition in order to reflect on the communicative possibilities of architectural model-making through practice-led design and the construction of new artefacts. We explored new techniques of model-making and asked if models can operate as dialectical and critical artefacts revealing the architecture of spatial concepts in other disciplines. [fig. 13]

Déjà vu uses architectural design as a critical research method, particularly between drawing and theoretical research, showing the potential of architectural design as critical theory (Haralambidou 2011).

It reveals the architectural significance of themes deriving from Resnais's film: architecture, memory and oblivion; the clash between its Baroque setting (Amalienburg Hunting Lodge, Munich) and Modernist narrative (*'nouveau roman'*, Robbe-Grillet); game theory in literature and design; *mise en abyme* in architecture, literature and film; erotic desire and architecture. [fig. 6]

Déjà vu exposes the architectural structure of the screenplay by becoming a topographical rather than chronological incarnation of the plot. The work is a model and a drawing of light on paper where the play of light and shadow of the film seeps through and marks the screens like ephemeral ink. It is also a short looped sequence that inscribes the imagery into the viewer's mind through repetition. [fig. 14]



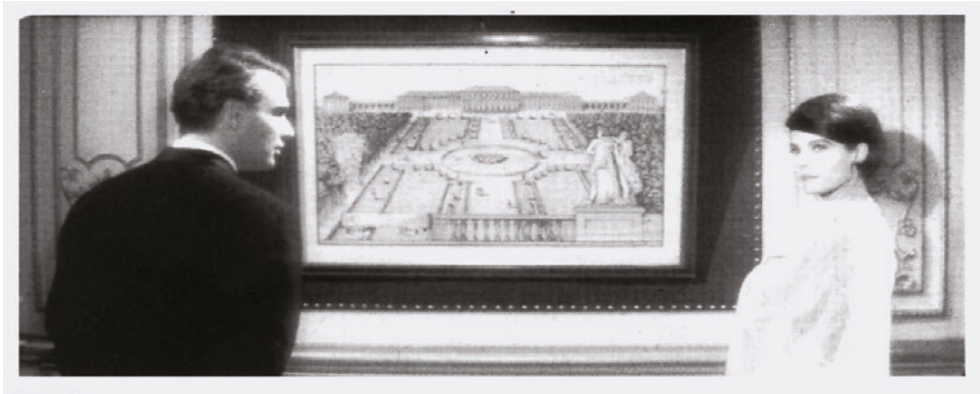
6a



6b

4 (previous page)
Installation view
with projection

5 (previous page)
Installation view
without projection



6c



6d



7



8



9



10





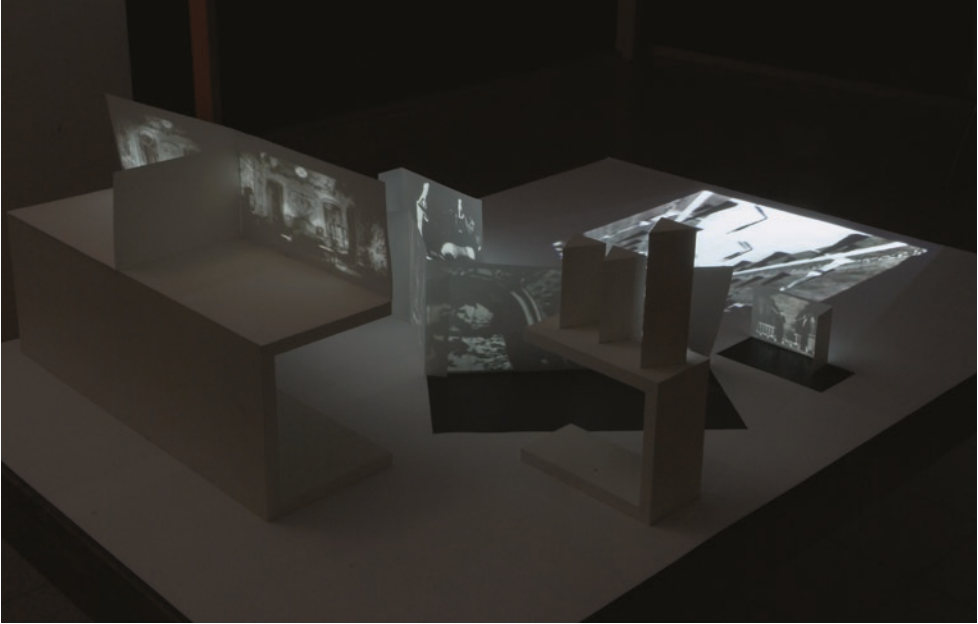
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12
The 'blossoming'
of the bedroom

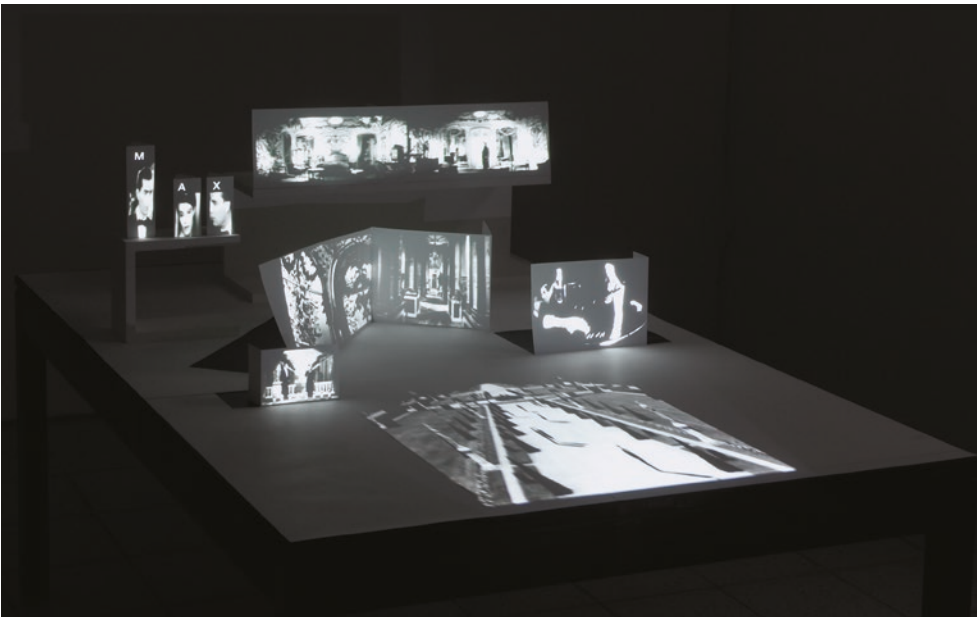


13
Installation view,
London Gallery West,
2009





14



15

14
**Installation view
 from the back**
 Photograph Andy Keate,
 2009

15
Installation view
 Photograph Andy Keate,
 2009

Questions

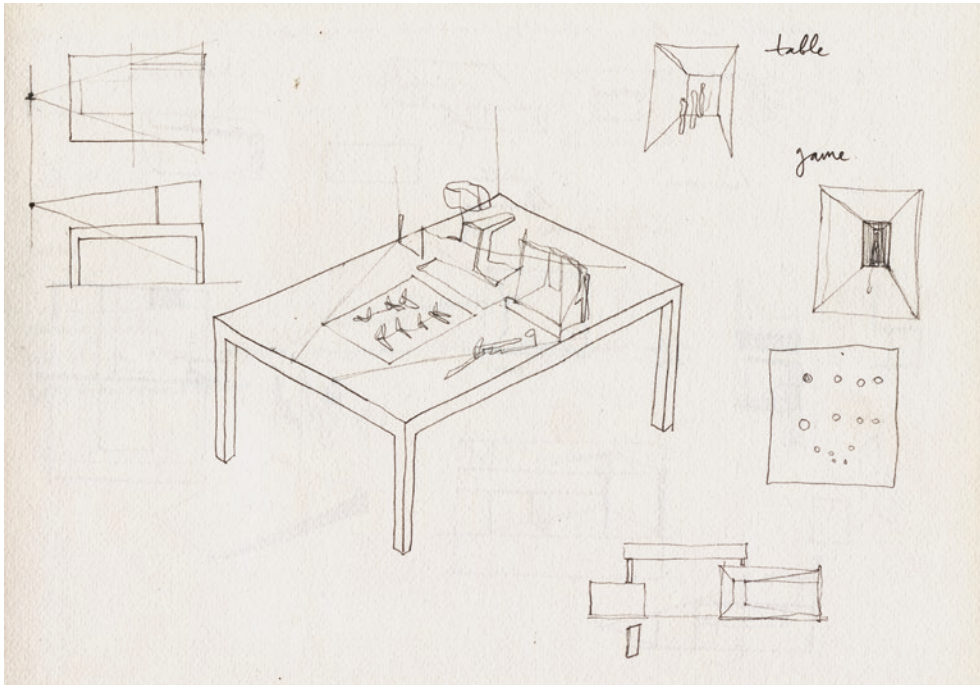
1. How do critical forms of design-led practice (drawing, model-making and digital film) blur the boundaries between architectural design and theory?
2. How can an architectural model present a critical reading of Resnais's film?
3. How do representational techniques which combine a physical artefact with a digital projection generate and capture architectural ideas and design?
4. What are the technical considerations of working with projected light and narrative as architectural drawing? [fig.15]

Context

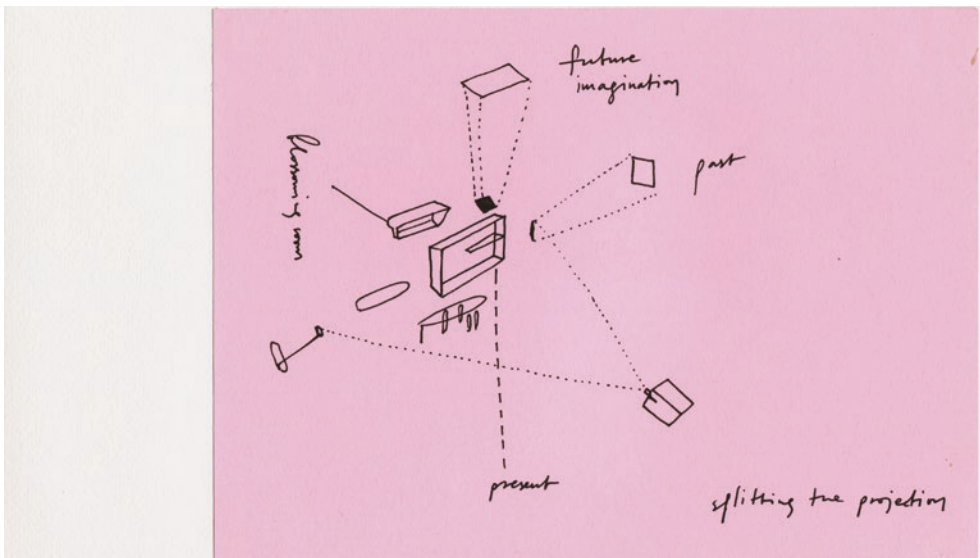
Practice-led research

The work employs architectural drawing as an analytical and creative tool in architectural design research. Architectural drawing has been employed by architects and architectural historians as an analytical tool in architectural history and theory (e.g. Evans 1997; Difford 2007) or as an analytical tool to investigate work from other disciplines (e.g. in art history and theory, Steadman 2001; and in film theory, Pallasmaa 1999).

Déjà vu employs an expanded notion of drawing to analyse Resnais's film, but differs from these examples, because it uses drawing creatively, proposing an innovative artefact that can be appreciated in its own right within the environment of an art gallery. This artefact has correspondences with other contemporary architects who have used design both analytically and creatively, e.g. Diller + Scofidio (1988), analysing the work of Marcel Duchamp, art theory and theatre stage design; and Koolhaas (1978), exploring the history and theory of urban design.



16



17

16 & 17
Sketches from *Déjà vu*
sketchbook, 2009

Digital projection techniques

1. The project develops a technique for projecting footage onto specifically designed three-dimensional artefacts. This approach has been used by artists (e.g. Laurie Anderson; Krzysztof Wodiczko; Tony Oursler, Pipilotti Rist and Olafur Eliasson) as well as architects (e.g. Diller + Scofidio 1988; Haque 2012).
2. The project also engages work on digital responsive projection techniques on physical models (e.g. the ETH Zurich's Future Cities Laboratory project, 'Projections of Reality', *Constructing for Uncertainty*, Smart Geometry, 2013).
3. The project also relates to other artefacts that rework existing films (e.g. artist Douglas Gordon's *Feature Film*, 1999, and *24 Hour Psycho*, 1993, based on Hitchcock's films). *Déjà vu* extends this approach into architectural design, and attempts to convey psychological nuances of occupation, and ideas about the role of memory and imagination in architecture, arranged spatially on an architectural model.

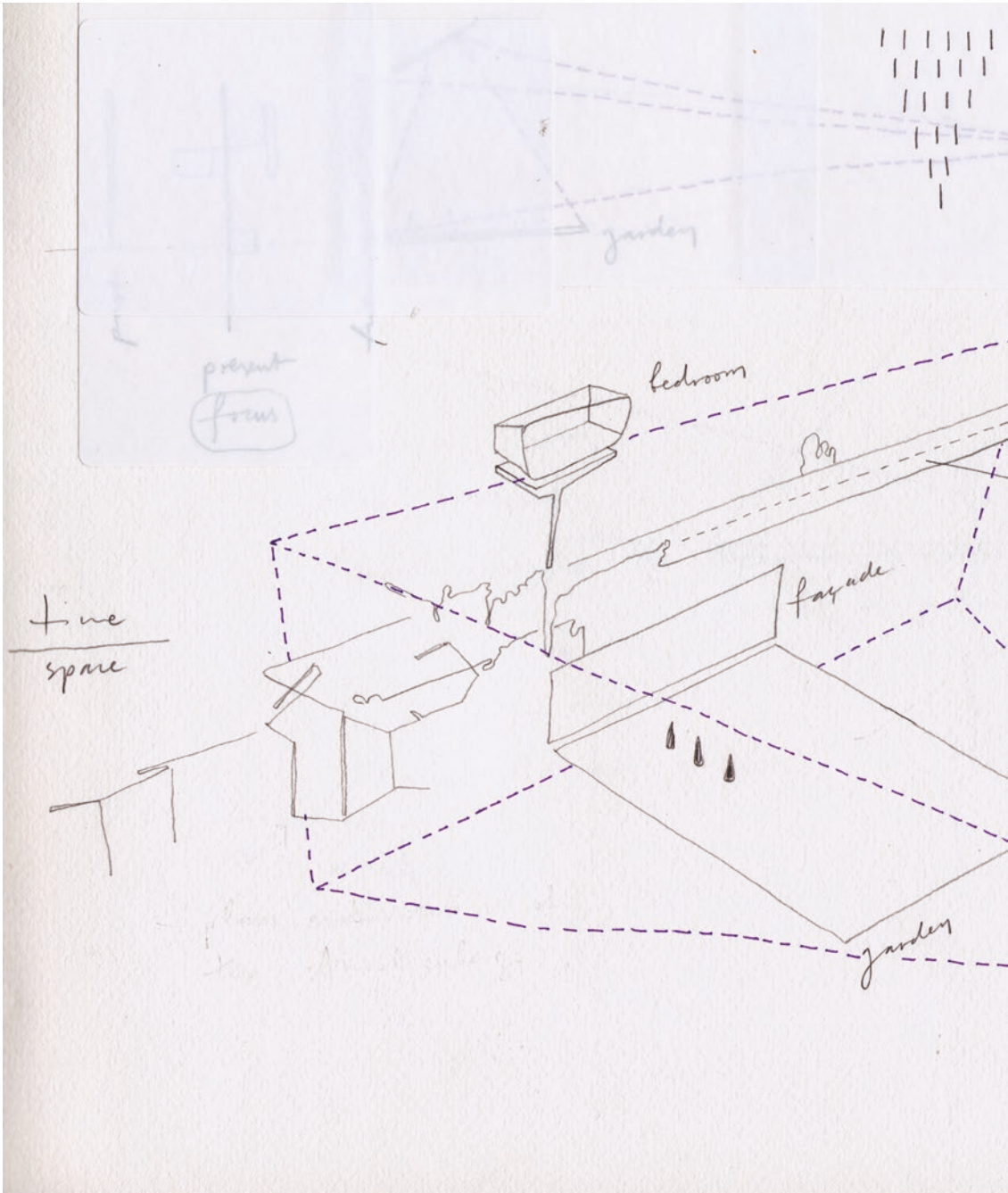
Methods

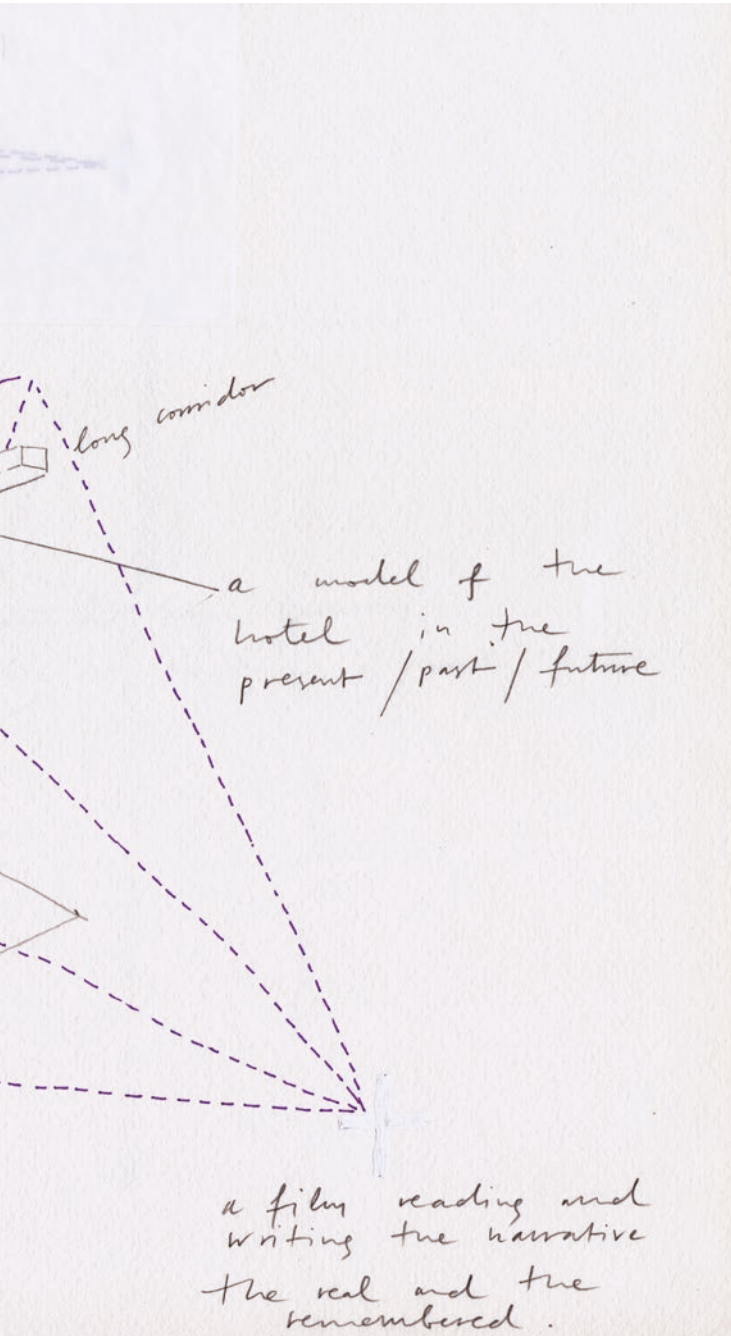
The work is an interdisciplinary enquiry into architectural design, model-making and digital film techniques, architectural history and theory, film theory and critical theory:

1. Iterative and written analysis of the spatial arrangement of the film itself and from related critical film literature (e.g. Dittmar 1980; Kivland 2007; Leutrat 2000; Morrissette 1975). [fig. 16–19]
 - a. Screenplay: Resnais's film is a faithful adaptation of Robbe-Grillet's exceptionally precise screenplay. As one of the main advocates of the *nouveau roman*, Robbe-Grillet writes in a style that is methodical

and geometric, focusing on often compulsive and repetitive descriptions of objects and spaces, rather than the characters that occupy them. A close reading of the screenplay, a literary 'blueprint', led to the choice of the scenes composing *Déjà vu*. [fig. 20]

Repetitions combined with the fractured timeline and enigmatic plot in the film produce an effect equivalent to a collage or a cubist painting. The screenplay's lack of chronological indications led the script supervisor Sylvette Baudrot to draw an elaborate graph that organises the film sequences on an X and Y axis in relation to change of set but also time. [fig. 21]

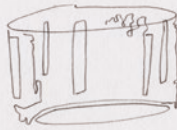




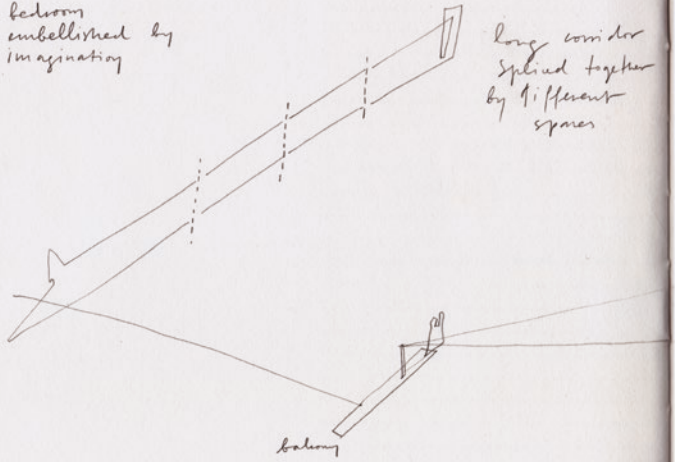
— Different spaces in the film



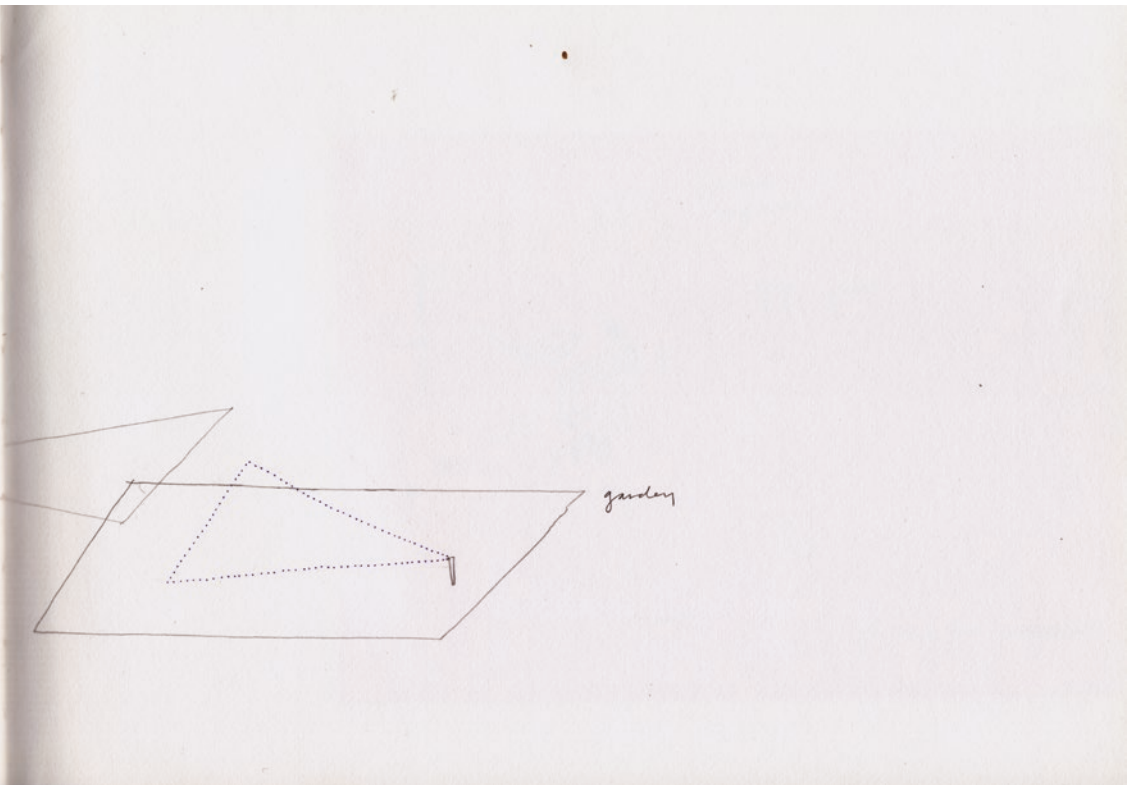
bedroom
embellished by
imagination

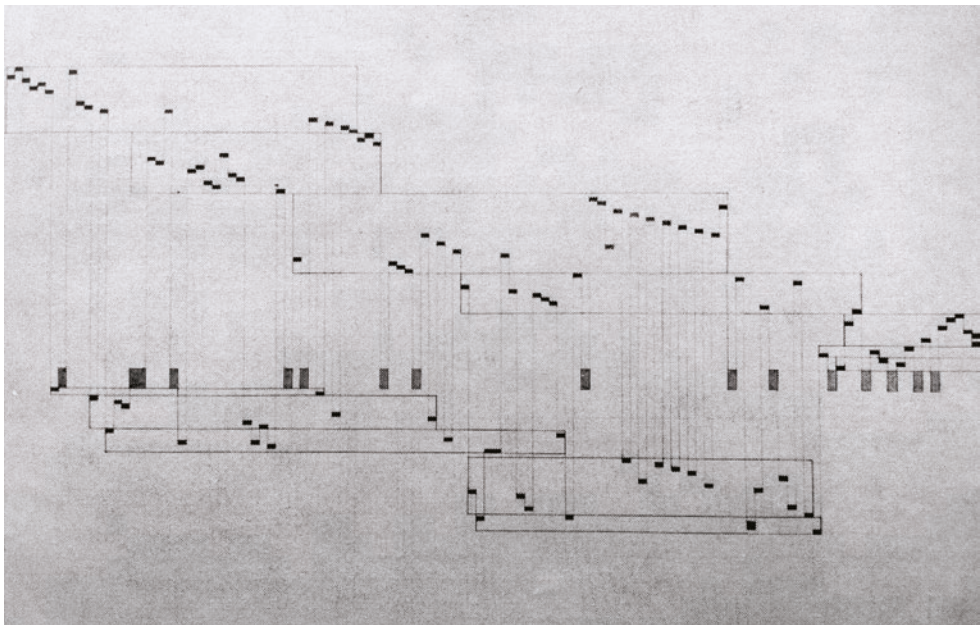
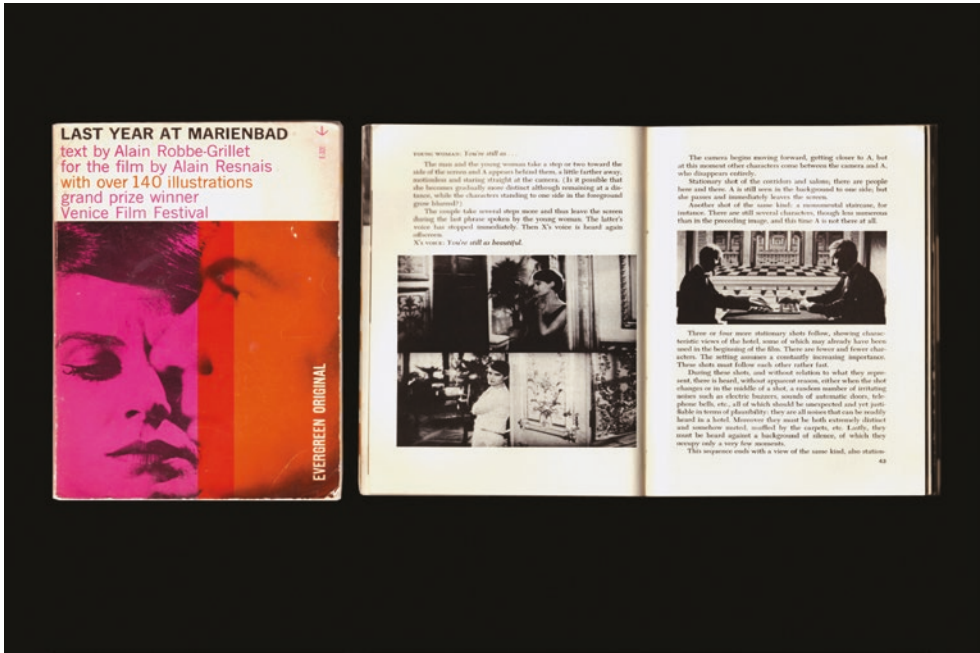


Amalimbung
find plans and sections



long corridor
splined together
by different
spaces





20
Alain Robbe-Grillet,
*Last year at
Marienbad* (1962)
cover

21
Diagram of the film
by script supervisor
Sylvette Baudrot
(1961)

Selected images and
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at Marienbad* used by
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is prohibited.

The diagrammatic delineation of time is made in the arrangement of the folded paper screens and focal range. In cinema, the surface of the projection screen coincides with the sharpest focus. Here the projector is positioned at an angle and the projection is designed to span the whole surface of the table. Placed in different locations within the focal range, the paper screens interrupt the projection pyramid in and out of focus. The selected scenes of ‘the present’ are in the middle of the table where the projection is in sharp focus (the embellished ceilings and views of lavish corridors). The past, ‘last year’ (the mysterious bedroom scene, ‘time in general’, the garden scene), appears out of focus at the back and front of the table. Belonging to memory or imagination, these scenes are blurred compared to the sharpness of the present.

2. Investigation into the connections between space, memory (or amnesia), imagination and desire in architecture and psychology.
 - a. The décor of the bedroom, where key scenes of the film take place, starts as a stark interior bathed in a blinding white light, but gradually ‘blossoms’ into a suffocating, complex, flowery pattern. This blossoming represents erotic desire, but also the opening up and unfolding of either a repressed memory, or a newly constructed event in the imagination (see Haralambidou 2011). By digitally reworking the image of the bedroom and creating

a short animation, the blossoming of the architecture (as a representation of desire in *Last Year at Marienbad*) is accentuated.

- b. Ideas about how the model and film can be ‘drawing in light’ and ‘redrawn’ in different ways were also explored in drawing workshops. [fig. 23 & 24]
3. Architectural historical research of Munich’s Baroque and Rococo architecture, especially François de Cuvilliers’s Amalienburg hunting lodge. [fig. 22]



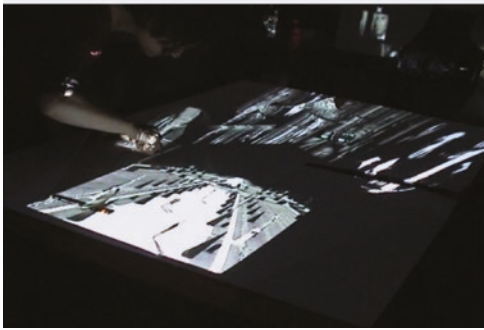
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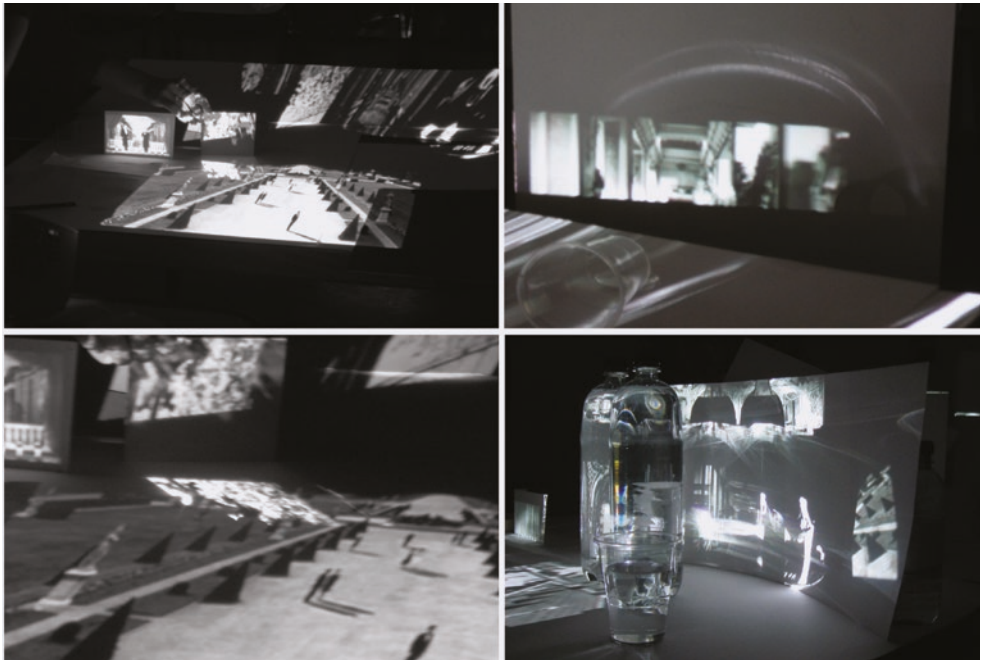
In the film, the Baroque hotel setting is not a single building, but a sinuous montage of different locations in Munich including scenes at the Schloss Nymphenburg palace and the Amalienburg hunting lodge, mixed with studio-constructed sets. Exposing the fragmentary architectural structure of the film, the model breaks the linearity of the plot and recounts events concurrently. [fig. 25–27]

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Amalienburg hunting lodge, Nymphenburg Palace Munich, 1734-1739

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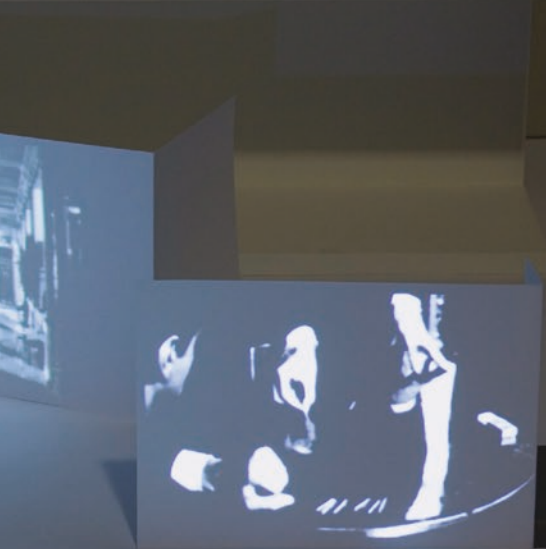


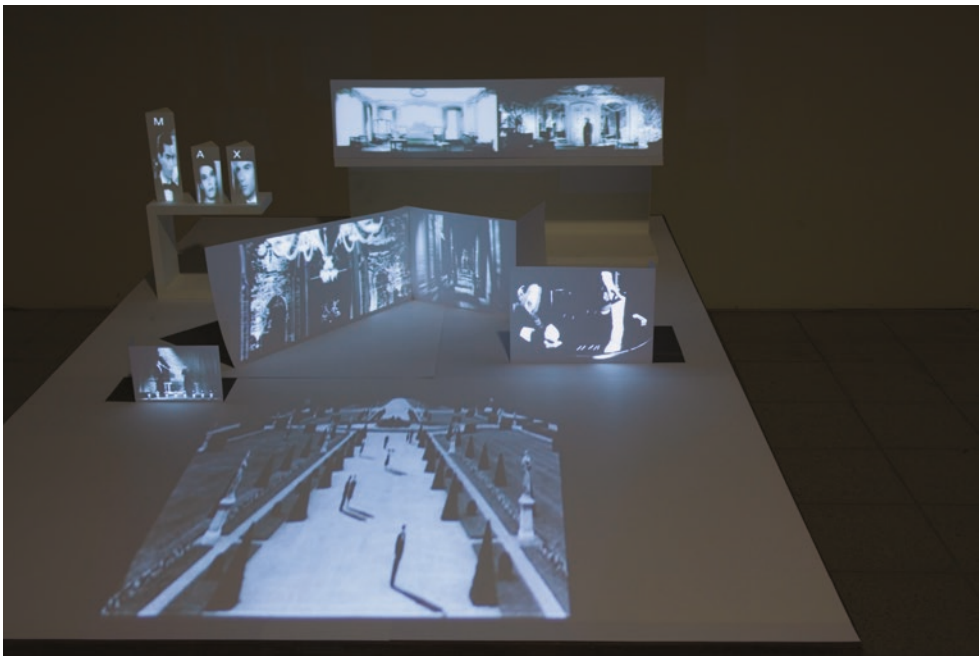
23 & 24
Stills from The Drawing Field workshop, 2009. Participants 'redrew' Déjà vu by using the same projection aimed at an angle on a table, but finding new ways to engage

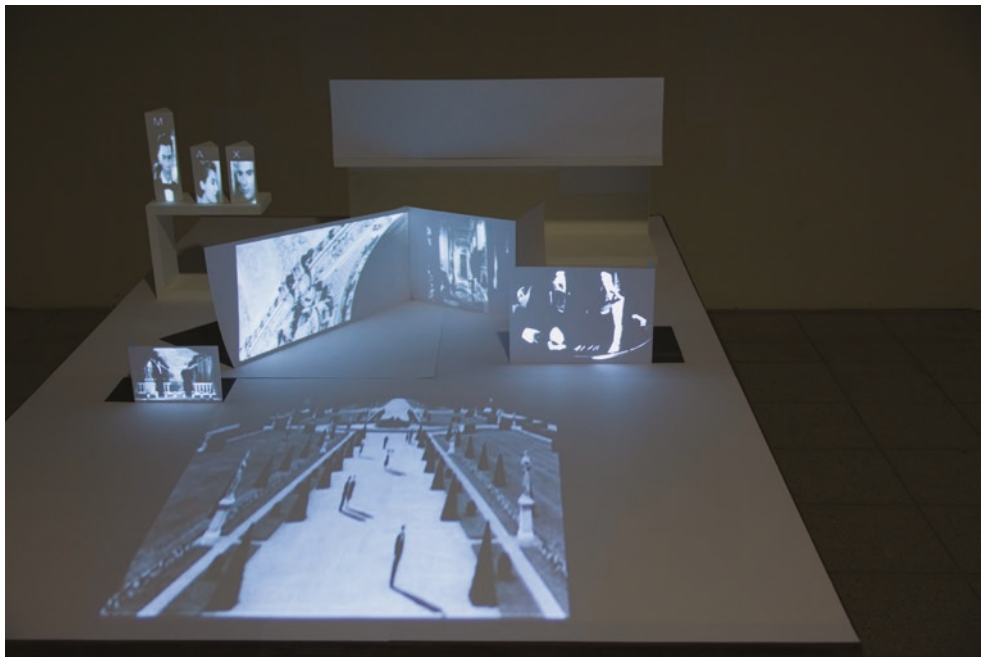
with the depth of the pyramid of light. The reflection, through mirrors, and refraction, through water-filled bottles and glasses, produced unexpected illusions and spectres,

captured and framed by imaginatively constructed paper screens. The intricacy of the resulting 'architecture', built out of paper and light, was similar to the film's Baroque/Rococo setting.



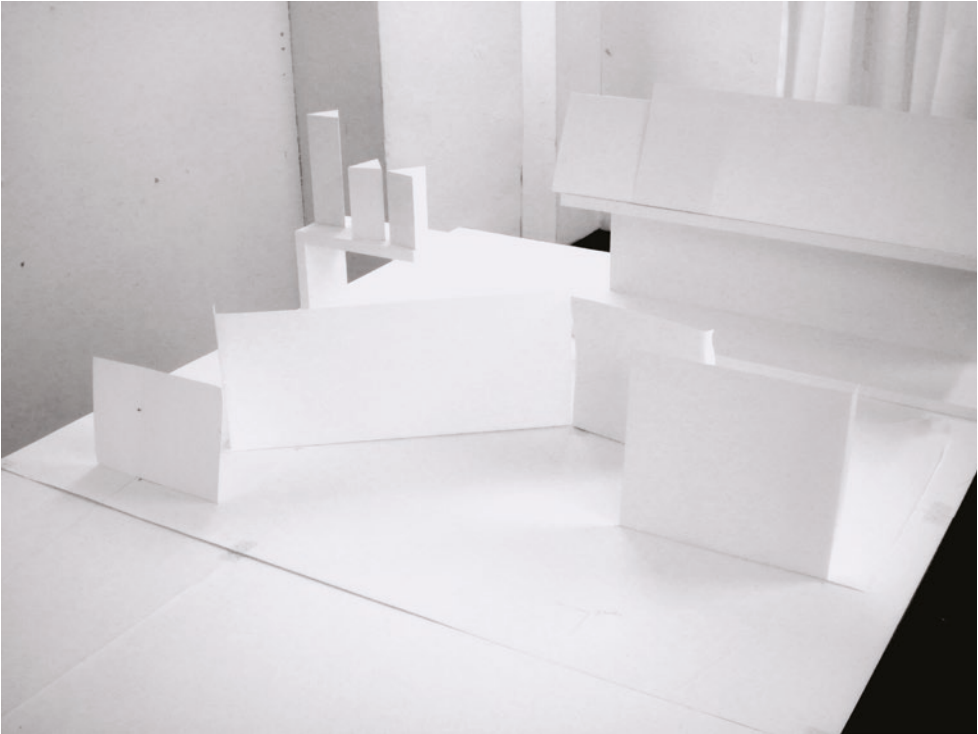


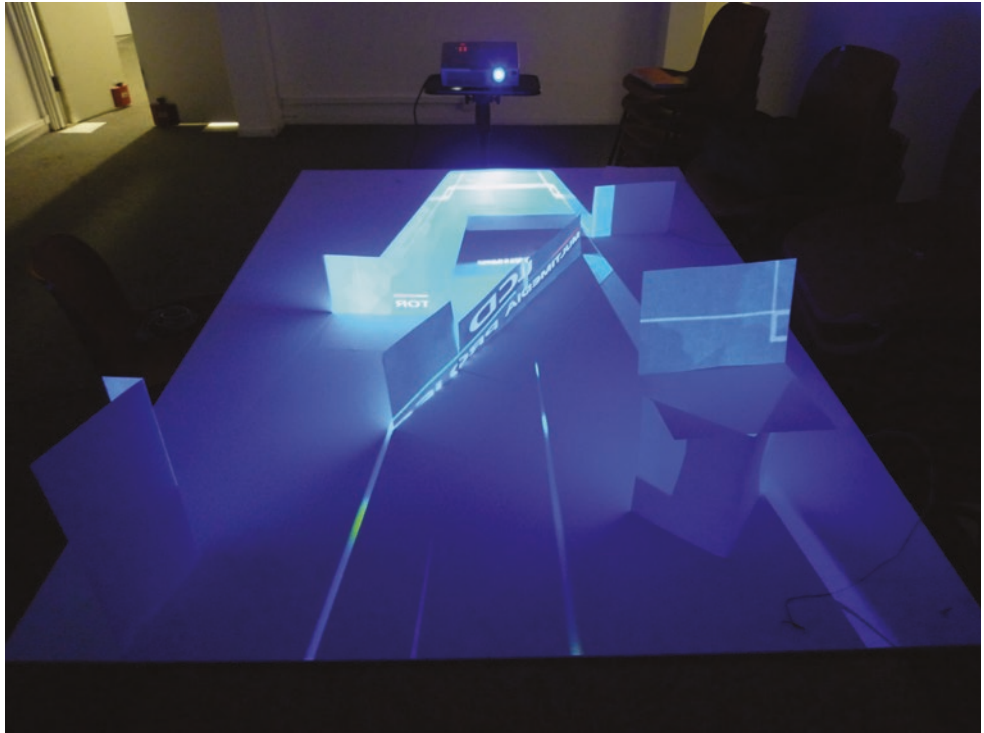




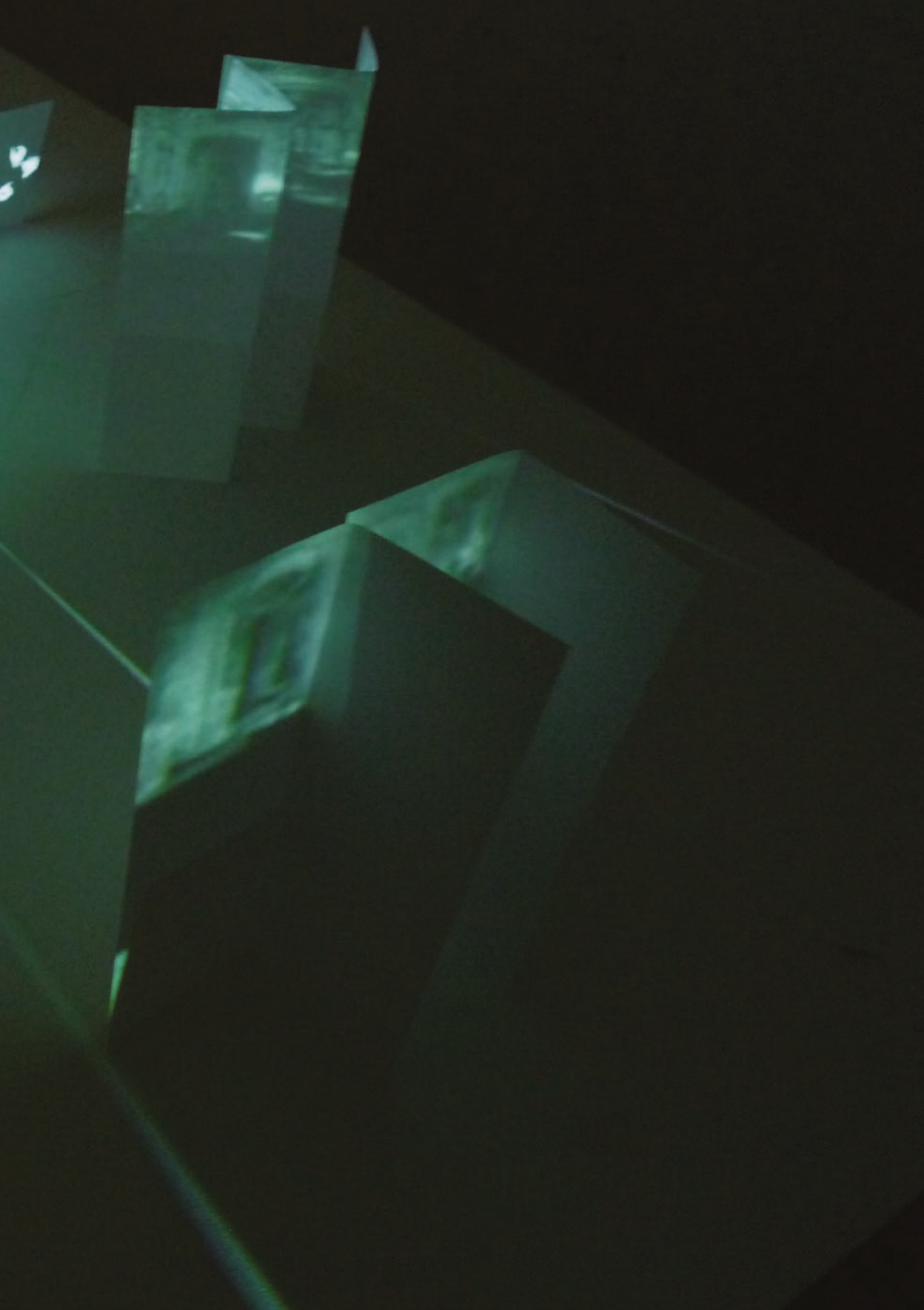
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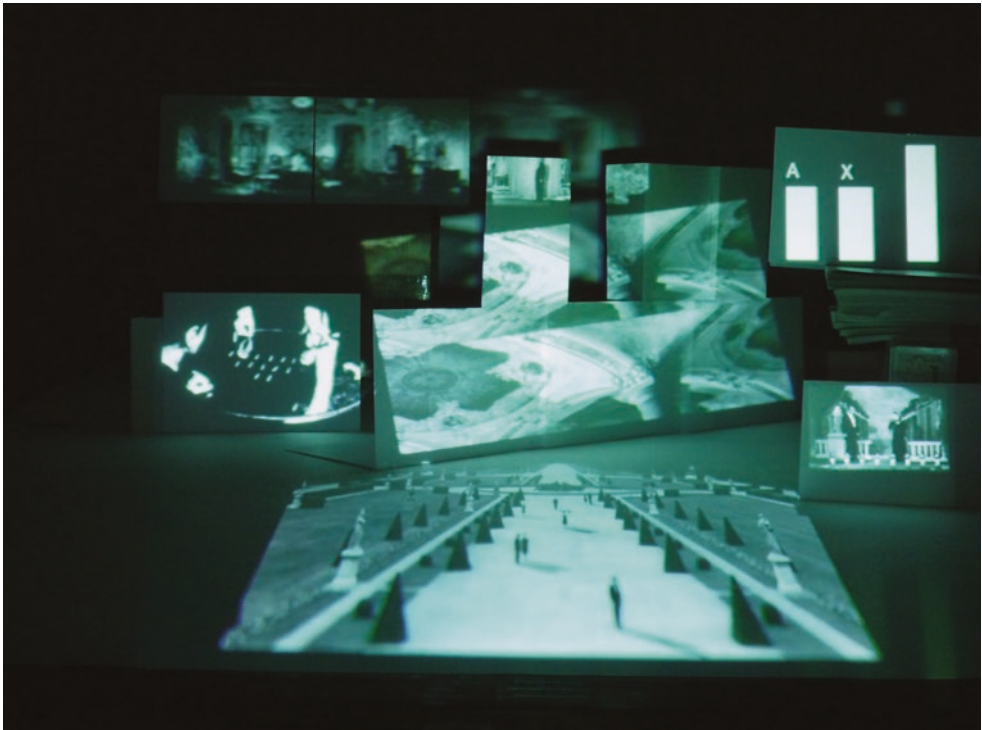
25–27
**Three different
moments of the film**
Photograph: London Gallery
West, 2009











30 (previous page)
Design iterations

31 & 32
Design iterations



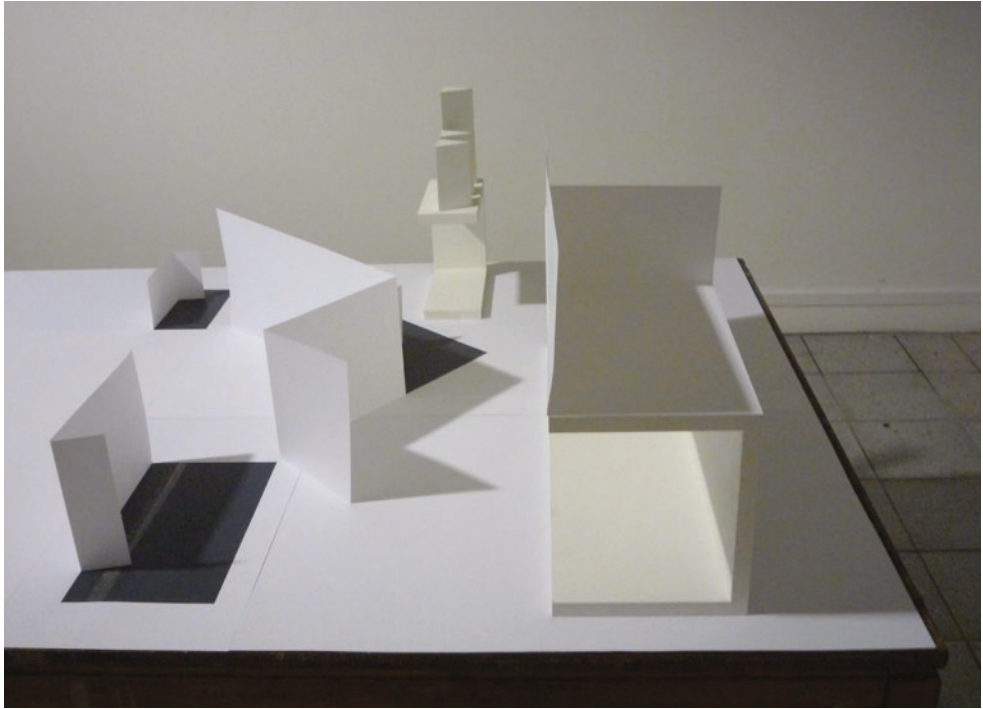
4. Design of a new interpretative artefact, incorporating a digital film projection onto a 3D model. [fig. 28–32]

The development of the design involved a series of iterations. The work began with digital manipulation of the original film, selecting, cutting and changing the size of specific scenes. A single new composite digital film was then made containing all the selected scenes in one frame in Final Cut Pro X. The exact position and perspectival distortion of the scenes were designed in parallel with the design of the physical model that occupied the projection pyramid. The contrast between the precise delineation of fragments of film in a digital medium and the precise manipulation of paper by hand within the space created by the projection was important. Two small plinths supporting the wooden triangular

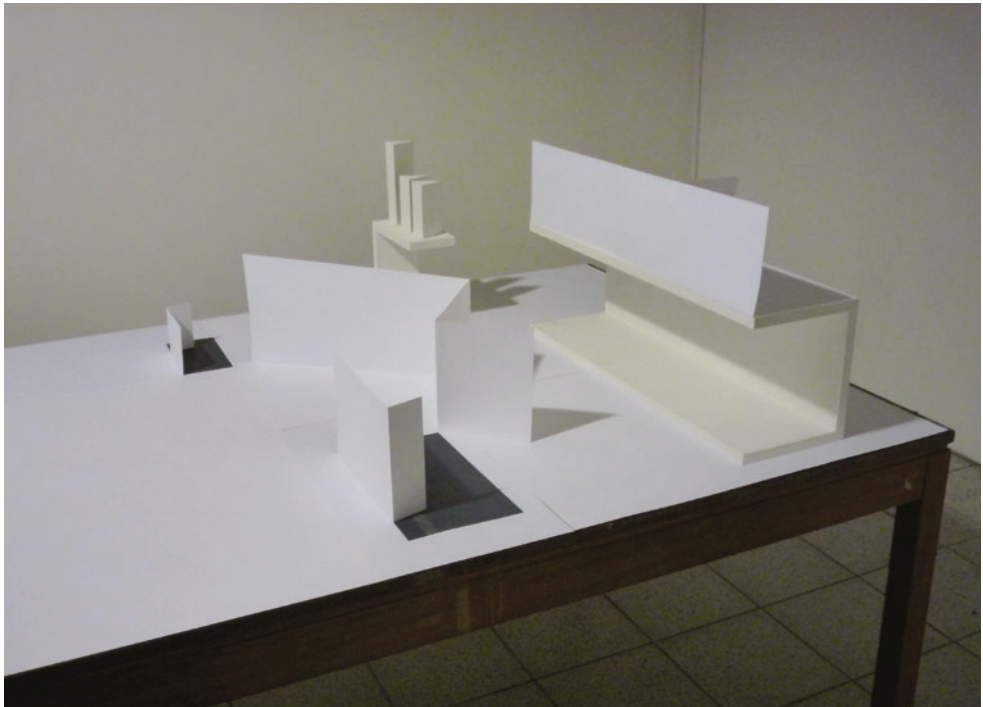
pawns receiving the projection of the faces of the three protagonists and the scenes in the bedroom at the far back were also constructed. [fig. 33–35]

The project analyses and adapts the existing film, by creating new interpretations and re-stagings of the original. It assimilates and subverts the themes, methods and language of communication of the film: e.g. restaging the narrative through a projection similar to cinematic experience, where images of light are captured on screen and presented in a darkened room. [fig. 36]

Here, however, the singular large and imposing screen that divides the space between the audience and the imaginary world depicted has split into several small screens spread on the table surface and displayed at an intimate scale.



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Dissemination

The work was exhibited in London Gallery West and reviewed in the *Journal of Architecture* (2009). It was published as an essay in the magazine *KTHA* (2011) and was the subject matter of the following events:

Gallery talk

'Speculative Models', London Gallery West, University of Westminster, London, April 2009.

Invited workshops

'The Drawing Field', Centre for Drawing, University of the Arts, London, May 2009.
'Re-imagining a Room', UCL Contemporary Projects, London, June 2009.

International invited lecture

'Architecture, Allegory and the Geometry of Desire', School of Architecture and the Built Environment, KTH, Stockholm, May 2010.

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Related publications by the researcher

pp. 50–57

Penelope Haralambidou (2011). 'The Act of Looking and Déjà vu: Notes on a "Figural Theory"'. *KTHA 2*: 2–9.

Related writings by others

pp. 59–63

Ro Spankie (2009). 'Speculative Models: Air Grid and the Blossoming of Perspective'. *Journal of Architecture 14.4*: 533–537.

Bartlett Design Research Folios**ISSN 2753-9822****Founding editor:
Yeoryia Manolopoulou****Editors:
Yeoryia Manolopoulou,
Peg Rawes, Luis Rego****Content:
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objectif****Typesetting:
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