

# My History is Not Mine

## A Speculative Allegorical Approach to Experiential Architecture

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### Abstract

This design-led research investigation focuses on architecture as a representation of cultural loss. Globalisation has spread Eurocentric modernist architectural principles across most cultures. In a very real sense, many Eastern cultures are having their own unique architectural histories rewritten, even erased, and are in danger of becoming lost. This investigation tests the methodology of using oral narrative (in this case, a series of superstitious Burmese tales from childhood) as a framing device to establish an architectural narrative about cultural loss in architecture. The research investigation reflects on the structure and semiotics derived from the abstraction of superstitions for challenging speculative architecture to give a voice to its own story about critical cultural loss. It reinterprets some of the most 'ordinary' Western elements of modern architecture – room, wall, ceiling, floor, threshold, window, etc. – through an Eastern lens, with the goal of obviating or reducing Western precepts. Eastern stories in the form of 'oral narrative superstitions' are used as provocateurs, starting points that help the project explicitly move away from traditional modernist architectural forms and relationships. The three design stages of the methodology progress iteratively: from

physical analogue models derived from the abstraction of oral narrative superstitions; to digital animations as a narrative tool for reinterpreting these design ideas as shifts in spatial conditions over time; and finally, to the virtual gaming environment to enable agency in which the participants can construct their own experiential narrative outcomes.

### Introduction

Many Eastern cultures are having their own unique architectural histories rewritten by modern architecture, even erased, and are in danger of becoming lost forever. This design-led research investigation addresses this problem by using Eastern stories in the form of 'oral narrative superstitions' as provocateurs, starting points, that help the project explicitly move away from traditional modernist architectural forms and relationships. It challenges conventional notions of architectural design, using a methodology that shifts experimental outcomes from the formal and visual to the spatial and experiential, through the architectural application of allegorical narrative storytelling. The research engages a virtual, time-based approach, which deviates from formalist

architectural design processes, in order to privilege the investigation of shifts in spatial conditions and experiential perceptions over time. The principal research question asks: How can architecture find ways to defy presumptive norms in relation to cultural archetypes, as well as methods of inquiry about architectural form, experience and space? It achieves this by looking at ways that experiential cultural artefacts can be engaged as a conceptual framework to generate an allegorical architectural project, and how the digital gaming interface can be used to help architectural design methods better explore the experiential as a design generator. The investigation posed three research objectives. Research Objective 1 explores how culturally scripted ideas can be explored and expressed through allegorical methods in the conception of an evocative architectural framework that deviates from Eurocentric modernist principles and constructs. Research Objective 2 explores how narrative architecture can activate allegory within the experiential as a tool for reinterpreting notions of ‘traditional’ architectural elements through shifts in spatial conditions over time. Research Objective 3 explores how digital gaming environments can be actively engaged in the architectural design process to enable agency to actively participate in the experiential narrative outcomes.

## Theoretical Framework

This investigation explores how the allegorical architectural project synthesises design and theory through visually creative, critical articulation of concepts. In her article “The Fall: The Allegorical Architectural Project as a Critical Method,” Dr. Penelope Haralambidou writes that “the allegorical architectural project [is] an experimental practice, pointing to ideas impossible to grasp through the profession or in purely discourse-based theoretical investigations.”<sup>1</sup> This investigation seeks to redefine conventional notions of architectural elements through speculative means and situates itself as an allegorical project that explores these challenges. In Haralambidou’s article, she critically reflects upon three principal traits of allegory in architecture: Figurative Geometries; Progress and Journey; and Invitation for Interpretation. These three traits establish a multi-layered theoretical background for the development of this design-led research investigation.



Figure 1. Nine model artefacts on conceptual game-map base plinth.

Figurative Geometries enable architectural narratives to engage meaning through allegory; Progress and Journey – understood as a sequence of events – introduce the importance of time, experience and shifting spatial conditions in an allegorical narrative; and Invitation for Interpretation introduces the importance of agency and cultural sensitivity/negotiability within a meaningful allegorical narrative experience.

## Design Stage 1

Design Stage 1 explores the first Allegorical Architectural Project, Figurative Geometries, using physical models (Figure 1). It explores how the oral narratives can be materialised into physical models through allegorical methods, using superstitions as cultural drivers for the conception of an evocative architectural framework. According to Haralambidou, “Allegory is a structure of thought where meaning is not grasped directly but through metaphor, that often takes the guise of narrative and story-telling.”<sup>2</sup> Allegory offers unique and creative design opportunities for conveying metaphorical meaning in works that contain encrypted ideas. It offers a meaningful layer upon which complex thoughts and ideas can be founded, as it acts as the provocateur that drives the design motive towards a meaningful and unique direction. Haralambidou builds her discussion of the figurative geometry on the views of American literary critic Angus

1. Penelope Haralambidou, “The Fall: The Allegorical Architectural Project as a Critical Method,” *Critical Architecture* (September 12, 2007): 226.

2. *Ibid.*

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Fletcher, who describes allegory as ‘figurative geometry’ – the abstraction of personages and everyday objects to signify meaning and relationships.<sup>3</sup> This notion of the figurative geometry is employed as a tool in the first design stage of this investigation to generate architectural artefacts that are abstractions of Eastern superstitions; these become provocateurs that set up a conceptual framework from which design ideas are conceived, developed and transformed.

Design Stage 1 is represented by a set of preliminary design explorations that focus on developing morphologies of sculptural artefacts through the abstraction of nine selected superstitions drawn from Eastern culture. The supernatural and mystical nature of superstitions provides an evocative allegorical conceptual framework for generating early preliminary design concepts for this design research. Figure 2 briefly outlines the abstraction process involved using design to extract the fundamental essence of each of nine superstitions. Each physical model attempts to formally express the concepts of each superstition into the morphological properties of an ‘architectural artefact.’ This design exploration series is a generative exploration using unconventional provocateurs to arrive at evocative outcomes – outcomes that actively avoid adhering to traditional architectural precepts. Their unique attributes offer opportunities rich with symbolic allegorical meaning and potential to develop the series further into innovative outcomes through the following two design stages.

### Design Stage 2

Design Stage 2, Narrative Architecture, explores the second Allegorical Architectural Project trait, Progress and Journey, using animated space (Figure 3). It explores how the allegorical artefacts from Design Stage 1 can be translated as spaces shifting over a course of time as a tool for reinterpreting ‘traditional’ notions of architectural elements.

The second principal trait of allegory extracted from Haralambidou’s writing is the notion of progress – a sequence of events understood as a journey. She discusses Walter Benjamin’s analysis of allegory and how he casts it as primarily an experience – an experience of the world not as permanent, but temporary, fragmentary and enigmatic.<sup>4</sup> This design stage focuses on the formation of temporal spaces that are experienced through the notion

		SUPERSTITION	MODEL CONCEPTS
1.		<i>Singing Old Man</i> When singing while eating, one may grow up to marry an old man.	Aged piece + kinetic piece (growth   ascension)
2.		<i>Whistling Snakes</i> Whistling at night will invite snakes into one’s home.	Eaves = snake [Eastern temple symbolism] Sound waves travelling outwards
3.		<i>Umbrella Ghosts</i> Opening umbrellas indoors is an invitation for ghosts.	Umbrella arch opens outside of framed member
4.		<i>Mirror Nightmares</i> Sleeping with feet facing a mirror will incite bad dreams.	Sleeper   Mirror   Dreamer in chaotic nightmare realm
5.		<i>Fingernail Ghosts</i> Clipping nails at night will provoke ghosts.	Ghosts passing through   Scraped traces   framed house   night time
6.		<i>Baby Tooth</i> Throw broken baby tooth upwards when it’s a bottom tooth or downwards when it’s the top so that the new teeth will know which way to grow.	Scale   balance   growth
7.		<i>Elbows of Misfortune</i> Don’t rest elbows on the dining table, or else one may end up poor.	Resting   Vertical entrapment
8.		<i>Twitching Eye</i> A twitching eye means someone is missing them.	Separation   Longing   Distance
9.		<i>Sleep Paralysis</i> When one experiences sleep paralysis, it is because a ghost is sitting on them.	Horizontality   Pinned down   Floating   Suspended   Idle

Figure 2. List of nine selected superstitions and their abstraction process.

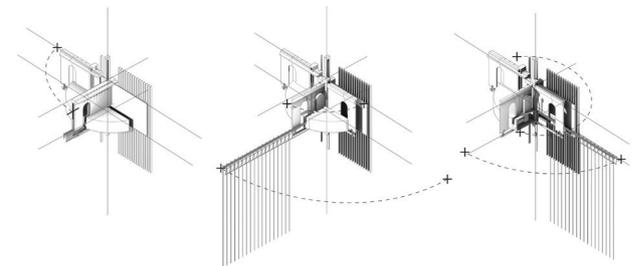


Figure 3. Design exploration of shift in spatial condition: Intervention #6 The Hinged Room.

3. Angus Fletcher, *Allegory, the Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1964), 231.

4. Haralambidou, “The Fall,” 226.

of the journey where time is a fundamental element in the construction of an architectural narrative.

Progress and Journey are explored in the second design stage of this investigation series through animated schemes where events unfold over the course of time, causing changes in the formal outcomes and shifting the spatial conditions. This stage introduces time as a factor that shifts the spatial conditions of the formal outcomes conceived through Design Stage 1. Time is an important aspect of how we experience and understand architecture, but time is rarely used to explore and question spatial and experiential qualities and how they may change over the course of time as new events unfold. This stage employs the digital animation medium as a tool to interrogate how conventional norms in architecture can be reinterpreted and challenged, by observing the effects of changes in spatial conditions unfolding over time. The architectural outcomes are challenged against the notion of time and redefined as temporal spaces bound by a sequence of events, as Haralambidou's notion of an experience of Progress and Journey.

The design investigation series in Design Stage 2 introduces time as a factor that shifts the spatial conditions of the formal outcomes conceived in Design Stage 1. Figure 4 outlines nine design explorations carried out through the animated schemes in Design Stage 2 – each a development of the nine artefacts from Design Stage 1. The design explorations interrogate how the formal outcomes of the nine artefacts can be framed to redefine and reinterpret 'traditional' architectural elements – room, floor, wall, threshold, etc. – within a time-bound medium. Figure 5 demonstrates a scheme for drawing links between the nine interventions as a method of joining them together to co-exist within the game environment in the next stage.

### Design Stage 3

Design Stage 3, Experiential Architecture, explores the third Allegorical Architectural Project trait, Invitation for Interpretation, using a game environment (Figure 6). It explores how the digital gaming environment can be used as a tool to enable agency in which participants are invited to construct their own architectural experiential

narrative journeys within the construct of an allegorically scripted environment.

According to Haralambidou:

*The work succeeds if it triggers many interpretations, because it is not the artist alone who performs the creative act: the viewers make their own contribution. It is clear, however...that [the artist] sees the work presented as a riddle or an enigma not only to the viewer but also to the author. Therefore, the work of art is an allegory in receiving, interpreting, but also in making.<sup>5</sup>*

The third principal trait of allegory as mentioned in Haralambidou's article is the ability of the work to invite interpretation.<sup>6</sup> Allegorical architectural works are structured so as to be understood in similar ways to a work of art, where meaning is not able to be grasped directly but through metaphors, and thus these works prompt an open-ended interpretation from the receiver. Invitation for Interpretation, as discussed by Haralambidou, establishes ambiguity in the work, offers multiplicity of outcomes and answers, and both the artist and the receiver contribute to the creative act. This concept is introduced into the project as an element of agency within a computer gaming medium. Within the constructed journey of the game, the player is free to navigate through the environment to discover new spatial player relationships from a point of view that would differ from other players' experiences. Even as the architectural designer of the animated sequences, the final outcomes of the journey are unexpected by me and create a work of art that is "an allegory in receiving, interpreting, but also in making."<sup>7</sup>

Design Stage 3 introduces the digital gaming environment as a medium within which the Design Stage 2 outcomes are framed, experienced and tested in relation to narrative theory. The nine interventions conceived in Design Stage 2 are organised within a fabricated context of a nine-square grid, where they each contribute their individual allegorical narratives – conceived through the animated schemes in Design Stage 2 – to the construct of the narrative experience of the game environment in this stage. Design Stage 3 introduces self-positioning of the participant as a vital tool for interpreting and navigating through one's own experience within the constructs of architectural

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5. Ibid, 230–31.

6. Ibid, 231.

7. Ibid.

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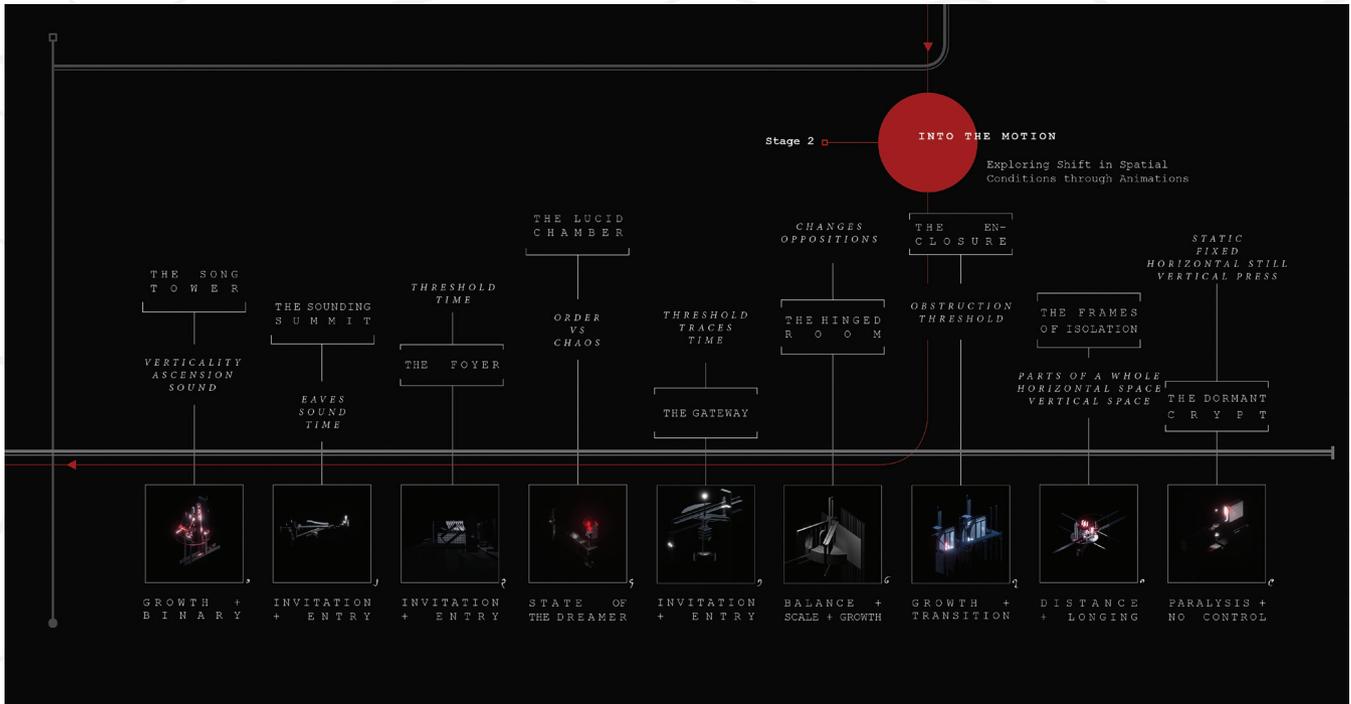


Figure 4. Design scheme of animated spaces in Stage 2.

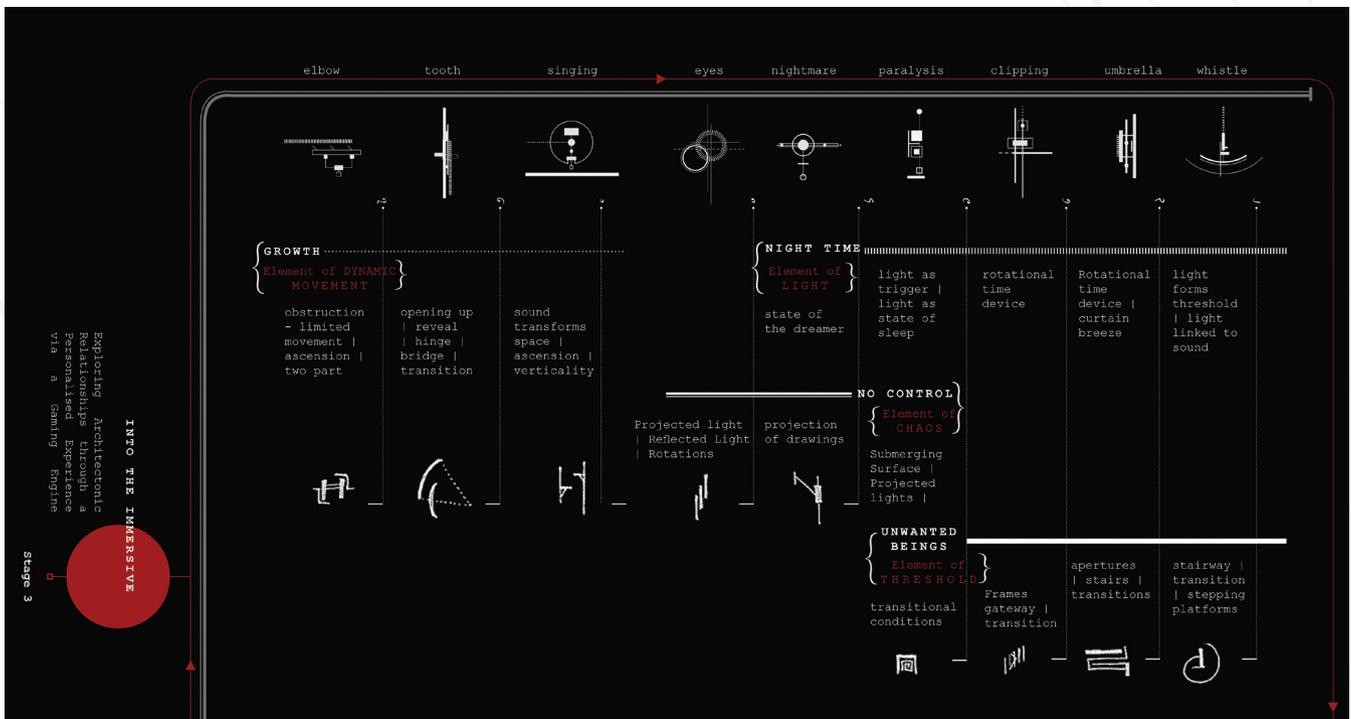


Figure 5. Design scheme to combine animated spaces in Design Stage 2.

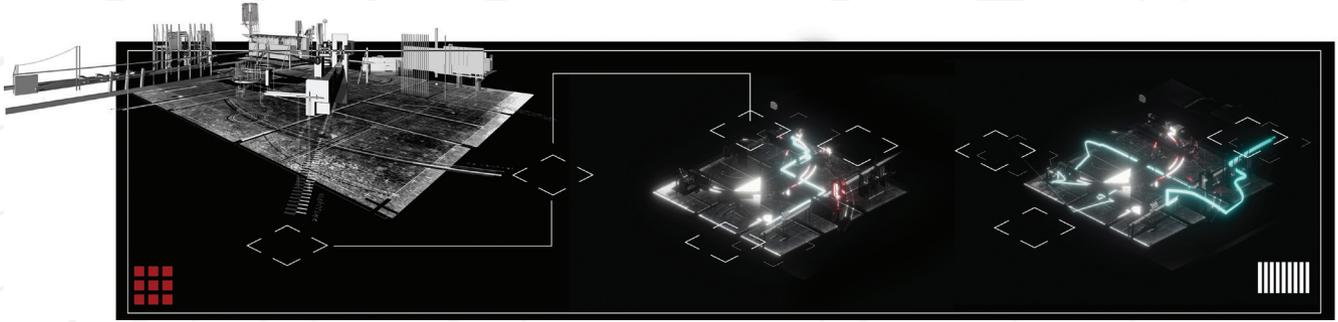


Figure 6. Game masterplan with player-route mapping.

spaces. It aims to introduce a personalised experience that further challenges the conventional ways that architecture is perceived, with the intention that through this shift in perception, the elements of architecture in question could be further redefined through the diverse perceptions of various participants (Figure 7).

The element of agency employed in this stage was actively tested with public participants in a flash exhibition (Figure 8) that tested user participation in the game environment. It allowed observation of the many different ways each participant chose to navigate through their own experience, and how agency resulted in a range of spatial and experiential outcomes.

## Conclusion

In this day and age, our personal identities and cultural identities, which are the vital constituent parts that make us unique as individuals, can often become slowly engulfed by the ideals of the Eurocentric world. Eastern culture in particular is rapidly losing much of its rich and unique identity with the influx of Western ideals and the adverse effects of globalisation.

This design-research-led investigation seeks possible solutions to mitigating the loss of unique cultural identity in contemporary architecture. It does this by collecting culture-specific superstitious beliefs and abstracting and reinterpreting their allegorical symbolic meanings within the construct of an architectural experiential narrative. It also invites a renewal of architectural agency through the use of computer gaming as an architectural design investigation medium. In gaming, agency allows for different experiences and outcomes for each player, and it offers a unique construct that is theirs and theirs alone. Traditional methods of designing architecture often struggle to incorporate agency as an important issue needing to be addressed by the design process.

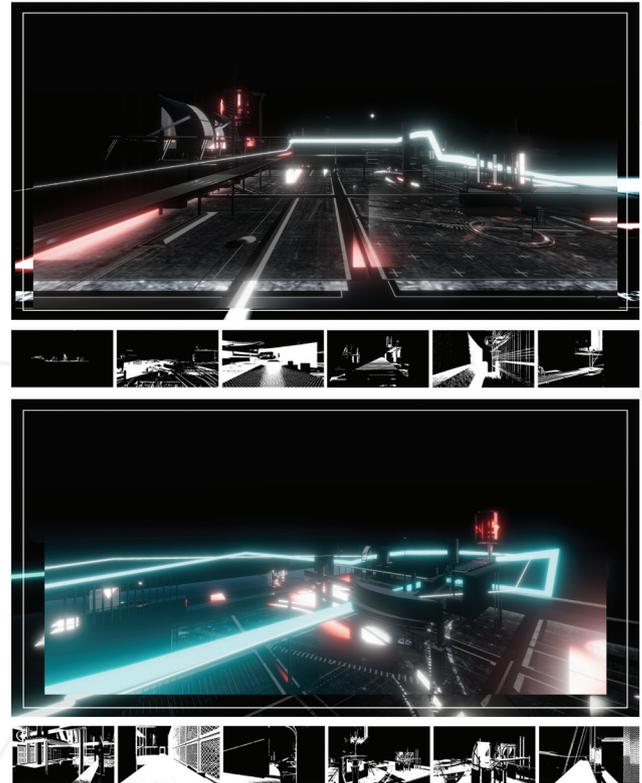


Figure 7. Game-play screenshots.

The architectural vocabulary arising from the superstitions in Design Stage 1 enabled important architectural elements, such as threshold, spatial enclosure, visual axes, etc., to be speculatively redefined, placing the viewer into an experiential realm in Design Stage 3, through the use of virtual gaming technology, which has often been ignored in traditional architectural design approaches. The goal of the investigation was to invite architectural design to become an experiential canvas upon which a person's unique culture can be situated and a personal anecdote applied. The methodology, shifting from physical models,

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Figure 8. Flash exhibition testing how agency redirects spatial outcomes through user participation.

to animations, and finally to the game environment, offers a unique set of design outcomes that challenges the conventional design process while also allowing concepts from a unique set of cultural ideas to become manifested in the allegory of the design.

It was essential that this issue be addressed and explored through design, as the questions are focused on notions of cultural concepts shifting into an architectural narrative experience. The principal aim of the investigation was to test an architectural design method that prioritises the experiential and challenges some of the ‘norms’ within which Eurocentric modern architecture have been traditionally situated. The formal outcomes of the preliminary designs, although other-worldly, attempt to move towards a way of generating architectural concepts derived from unique cultural elements. They represent possible approaches to conceiving and testing a new and contemporary process for retaining important cultural values through architectural allegory.

Burmese poet Zeyar Lynn’s poem “My History Is Not Mine” helped set up the premise for this investigation to be based as a search for personal identity. The poem is a lament, proclaiming that academics and historians write our history for us. The poem reflects upon historians prescribing identity, which can lead to a loss in individualism and unique cultural identity. Lynn writes: “I have not written my history. They have written it for me, those academics. They have written their own versions... My history has just begun. I am going to write my own history.”<sup>8</sup>

By positioning itself to be drawn from an autobiographical genesis, the investigation opens an opportunity for the researcher to invite users to participate in a self-positioning exercise within a controlled landscape of personalised artefacts. The participants are invited to navigate through their own narrative journeys to construct and negotiate meaning and perceptual understanding of a world constructed through the abstraction and interpretation of a cultural lens. This design research *My History is Not Mine*<sup>9</sup> awaits endless possibilities, endless interpretations and endless journeys to be experienced by new participants. “My history has just begun. I am going to write my own history.”<sup>10</sup>

8. Zeyar Lynn, “My History Is Not Mine,” in *Bones Will Crow: 15 Contemporary Burmese Poets*, ed. Ko Ko Thett and James Byrne, 148–49 (London: Arc Publications, 2012).

9. May Myo Min, *My History Is Not Mine*, 2020, <http://cargocollective.com/danielbrown/My-History-Is-Not-Mine>.

10. Lynn, “My History Is Not Mine.”

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May Myo Min is a graduate of Victoria University of Wellington, where she obtained her Master of Architecture (Professional) and her Bachelor of Architectural Studies degrees. Her interests lie in the implications of cultural elements in the design process of contemporary architecture and the utilisation of modern technology as a critical method to interrogate and pursue design concepts.

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Daniel K. Brown is a registered architect and holds the interdisciplinary chair Professor of Design Studio at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. His research investigates allegorical architecture – design as storytelling, situating architecture into the realm of social and cultural activism. Prior to entering academia, Brown was Vice-President of Emilio Ambasz and Associates in New York. He has been awarded numerous international research fellowships including the Fulbright, as well as twelve teaching awards including the New Zealand National Award for Sustained Excellence in Tertiary Teaching.

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