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ARCH 344 01 (F11): Urban Life & Landscape  
Final Paper: 301 Crown Street

Over the course of this semester I have been working on a collaborative site specific installation at La Casa Cultural, 301 Crown Street. In this paper I will discuss the development of this project—from conception, to research, to final outcome—using it as central point from which to expand into wider issues of reconstruction, renovation, ethnography and historical recollection, all the while returning to the project. I aim to frame the project not only in relation to the class and some of the readings we have discussed, but also to my own design practise. Taking cues from Carlo Rotella’s “Industry, Nature and Identity in an Iron Footbridge” and Gabrielle Brainard’s “Party Walls” I plan to focus on a specific site and in doing so make wider associative connections.



The installation at La Casa initially came about from a series of conversations with Daniel Pizzaro, a fellow graphic designer. He had shown me some photographs of the interior space at La Casa and said that he and two other Latino students—Ronny Quevedo and Kenny Riv-  
ero, both of whom are on the Painting and Printmaking program—had been given almost carte  
blanche for the space. It was unclear at this stage what the space would be used for but as

Daniel showed me some of his photographs we began to talk about the seemingly odd scars of adaptation around the building—painted over doorways, blocked up fireplaces, walls with filled in archways, rooms that led to dead-ends. Concurrently, I had been looking for a space to work site specifically with, an opportunity to manifest some of the recurring themes in my own design practise on an exploded scale and the space at La Casa along with the opportunity to work collaboratively seemed ideal. I had been keen to see how these recurring motifs—of reconstructions, re-stagings, historical revisionism— would hold up at this scale; a transition from the printed page to an entire building. Moreover, in preliminary written statements that outlined my working method I had made continual reference to archaeological and architectural terminology and felt it pertinent to explore a more physical and material approach. For example, I had alluded to Leonard Woolley’s 1930 *Digging up the Past*, quoting his statement that “all excavation is destruction... all that remains is a hole in the ground and a group of objects in a museum”<sup>1</sup> and recurrently aligned myself to Alison and Peter Smithson’s “as found” credo— “where the art is in the picking up, turning over and putting with”<sup>2</sup>.

We gathered as a group of four and began to discuss possibilities for the our *intervention* into the building. It became clear from the outset we were not interested in showing work, as it were, but intent on working responsively and specifically to the space we had before us. The building’s continually adapted interior architecture and the traces of alteration were, for us, an ideal window into the history of both La Casa Cultural, and as a record of the building itself. The focus would be on a space as constant record rather than a static structure.

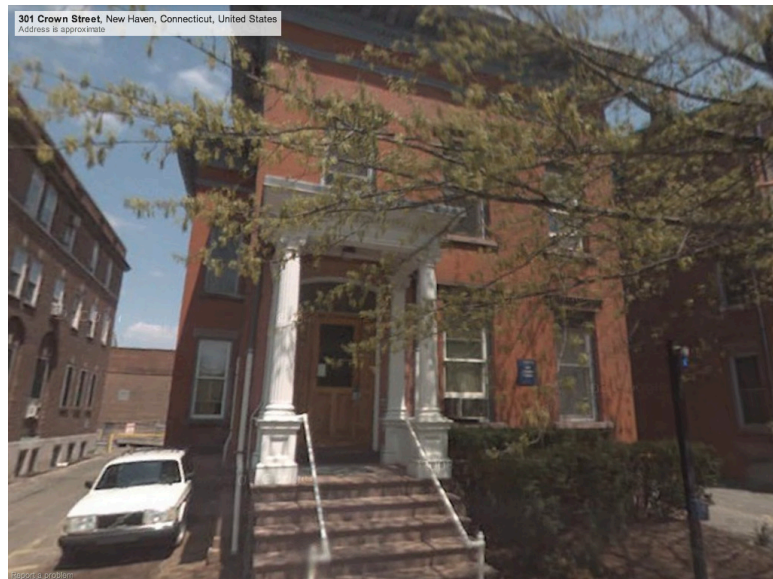
La Casa Cultural; the Yale Latino Cultural Center are the current occupants of the building, located at 301 Crown Street. The centre was initially formed by a group of Puerto Rican under-

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<sup>1</sup> Woolley, L. *Digging up the Past*, 1930, Ernst Benn Ltd, London, p.39

<sup>2</sup> Lichtenstein, C. & Schregenberger, T. (eds.) *As Found: The Discovery of The Ordinary*, 2001, Lars Müller Publishers, p.8

graduates in 1974 under the name Casa Boricua Inc. before transferring to La Casa Cultural in 1977. It began as a society only for Puerto Rican students and paved the way for similar ethnic cultural groups at Yale, with equivalent cultural centres for Chicano, Native American and Asian American students established soon after. In 1997 it was announced that 301 Crown Street and the next door building were to be demolished and in exchange the groups would be offered a basement in Old Campus with a capacity of only 40 people. Following town hall meetings and opposition from Latino students a merging of all Latino cultural centres was proposed and in 1999 this incorporation was realised. Under the new name *La Casa Cultural, The Latino Cultural Centre* these groups would come together in a shared space and would be allowed to remain at 301 Crown Street.



Our collective interest in 301 Crown Street, as a site of intermittent interior re-workings had close ties to Gabrielle Brainard's piece on the rowhouses of Court Street, "Party Walls: Understanding Urban Change Through a Block of New Haven Rowhouses, 1870-79". Furthermore I see parallels in the structure of Brainard's piece to this paper—the discussion of a specific structure on the micro level, opening out and diverging into wider discourse. Brainard extolls the Court Street rowhouses for their malleability—"the rowhouses are remarkable in their abil-

ity to adapt to change. Over the past century, they have been upscale townhouses, two-family houses, flats, and cheap rooming houses.”<sup>3</sup> Describing their architecture as one of “a pared-down, utilitarian version of the Italianate brownstone” Brainard identifies the modular nature of the houses construction as key to their staying power. Notions of modularity one would usually associate with a more loftier form of architecture than a set of rowhouses—for me it instantly conjures images of Cedric Price and of the Smithsons’ Hunstanton School—yet here in a somewhat unassuming New Haven street we have such a structure. “Nonloadbearing partitions made the relationships between rooms and floors easy to modify,” Brainard states. While, occupants could shift interior walls in order to convert private spaces into shared ones or public spaces into private apartments. This view of the building as a shell in which complex interactions and adaptations can take place very much resonates with the aforementioned Hunstanton School in Norfolk, England. Completed in 1954 the school was the product of a 1949 competition won by the Alison and Peter Smithson, both of whom were 21 at the time. Reductive and direct in form, the building marked a movement from a moderate and regionalist form of modernism. The floor plan is entirely symmetrical along two axis and the ground floor and upper floor are divided into general-purpose spaces and classrooms respectively. The school was built around notions of spatial flexibility and openness—you were never more than 25 feet away from a stair at any point. An exposed welded frame runs throughout, into which large glass panels were inserted. This frame work allowed for the repositioning of partitions without the need for major structural change. A reductive structure for complex interaction to take place within.

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3 Brainard, G. “Party Walls: Understanding Urban Change Through a Block of New Haven Rowhouses, 1870-79”, *Journal of New Haven Colony Historical Society*, Volume 48, Fall 2001

What's more, Brainard's mention of Le Corbusier and his desire to "demolish the old city and build it anew"<sup>4</sup> again brings to mind the Smithsons "as found" mentality, perfectly manifested in their Upper Lawn Pavilion. Here, the antecedent structure of the site is not wiped out to be replaced anew, but is instead carefully incorporated into the new building. A preexisting wall, still structurally sound used to bear load, foundations re-used, a chimney and windows found on the site integrated, resulting in a combination of disparate elements held together by a consistency in materiality and rhythm. A delicate back and forth between old and new, a building that sits somewhere between restoration and an entirely fresh construction. This is very much something we wanted to bring to our own piece—an intervention that not only drew on the past of the building, but also built on it, both literally and figuratively.

I also drew connections to the work of artist Michael Asher and in particular his installation at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in 2008 . A reconstruction of all the stud walls in precisely the same positions as they were in each of the 44 previous exhibitions in the space since 1998, exactly according to the floor plans of each show. A physical manifestation of spatial changes within the building all at the same time, creating juxtapositions of skeletal walls overlapping and creating new spaces that never before existed. In making a work for a gallery with no permanent collections, a space constantly changing with each successive show, Asher manages to archive every single show that has been housed there without showing any of the actual work. Here history reveals nothing other than its own structural process.

A more recent exhibition by english artist Simon Starling at the Camden Art Centre in 2010 draws distinct parallels with Asher's site specific works, and indeed acknowledges it as an inspiration. The exhibition took the form of a re-representation of work from the gallery's archives

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<sup>4</sup> Brainard, G. "Party Walls: Understanding Urban Change Through a Block of New Haven Rowhouses, 1870-79", *Journal of New Haven Colony Historical Society*, Volume 48, Fall 2001

placed in the same positions they had previously been presented in. Titled *Never the Same River (Possible Futures and Probable Pasts)* the show attempts to, as Starling himself puts it, “create a kind of temporal polyphony or even at times, cacophony, orchestrating a series of collisions between, until now, spatially and historically remote works, all of which worry at the borders of our understanding of time.”<sup>5</sup>

In this preliminary stage, we also discussed Christopher D’Arcangelo and Peter Nadin’s 1978-79 galley project, entitled *The Work shown in this space is a response to the existing condition and/or work previously shown within the space*. This was a series of successive shows, in which each contributor was invited to respond contiguously to the existing structure and work in the space. It opened with an empty gallery, entitled *30 Days Work* a reference to the time put into refurbishing the space, and was subsequently added to until D’Arcangelo’s death in 1979. The invite listed the shows sequentially with the opening text: “We have joined together to execute functional constructions and to alter or refurbish existing structures as a means of surviving in a capitalist economy”<sup>6</sup>.

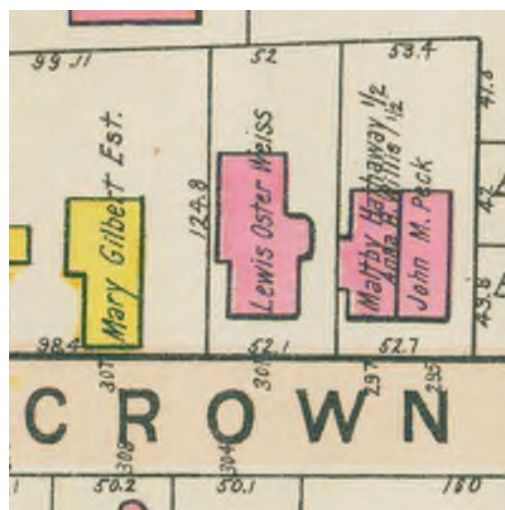
A space as record; seemingly fertile ground. However, we naturally didn’t want to re-tread such familiar territory. We felt it important to keep in mind these examples but to be continually aware of our own intentions. We were keen to work with La Casa archivally and historically but also did not want to come across as didactic. The sense of speculation that first attracted us to the space, along with somewhat conflicting accounts of the building’s history that had been given to us were to be key.

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5 Starling, S. *Never The Same River (Possible Futures, Probable Pasts)*, 2010, *Camden Art Centre File Notes*, Camden Art Centre, London

6 Condorelli, C. *Support Structures*, 2009, Sternberg Press, p.243

We attempted to put together a construction history, akin to the building history assignment, and overviews in Elizabeth Mills Brown's *New Haven: A Guide to Architecture and Urban Design* through a number of visits to the Whitney Library at the New Haven Museum. We were able to establish, primarily from Sanborn maps, that the building had been home to Connecticut cigar manufacturer Lewis Ostwerwies and remained unchanged in terms of exterior structure since 1886. While these visits did not give us much more to go on, and further searches led us down dead ends, the lack of hard empirical records became a point of interest in itself. This lack of building records was attributed to the fact that the structure itself was a considered architecturally unremarkable—a number of very similar homes were built in and around New Haven—and it had been built at a time when it was not subject to strict planning regulations or records. Our installation was to be as much informed by speculative aural accounts as solidified *evidence*. As historiographer Keith Jenkins asserts in his book *Re-thinking History*, there is a separation between the *past* and *history*—the past serving as a “construction site”<sup>7</sup> of facts on which history is built. For us, the construction site was to be one of deliberately unstable foundations.



<sup>7</sup> Jenkins, K. *Re-thinking History*, 1991, Routledge, London, p.6



In considering a speculative historical account of the space, informed but not fully verified by records, recollecting a recent trip to the Mayan ruins at Uxmal in Mexico proved productive. Uxmal is the site of a Mayan city in Yucatan, Mexico, less well known and more run-down than the famed Chichen Itza, which was named as one of the “New Seven Wonders of the World” in 2007. George Kubler declared Uxmal to be “the most intactly beautiful of all Maya cities,” continuing to state that it was “also the least typical, having, like most masterpieces, transcendent properties and qualities.”<sup>8</sup> (p236) Uxmal proved important to me for its status as site devoid of empirical historical records, a site which is subject to altering opinions and speculation rather than a simple black and white account of events. Whilst visiting in the summer, structures would be described with the proviso *almost certainly or from what we understand*. This almost poetic sense of mystique peaked my interest at the time and whilst working at La Casa drew clear parallels. This was underlined by the process of restoration at Uxmal that I witnessed.



Earlier I mentioned Leonard Woolley’s statement that “all excavation is destruction” and as artist Hito Steyerl remarks, in her e-flux article “A Thing Like You and Me”, “things often have to be destroyed, dissolved in acid, cut apart, or dismantled in order to tell their full story.”<sup>9</sup> How

then could elements be dismantled, studied and reconstituted. At Uxmal I had taken a num-

<sup>8</sup> Kubler, G. *The Art and Architecture of Ancient America*, 1962, Yale University Press, p.236

<sup>9</sup> Steyerl, H. “A Thing Like You and Me”, *e-flux Journal* #15, April 2010, available online at: <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/134>



ber of photographs that alluded to this very process. In order to discover more about the site, archaeologists had to take apart its structures but had thought to number the bricks as they were doing so, thus allowing for subsequent reconstruction. The result is a series of engraved numbers that run up the sides of the temples and pyramid structures. This to me, was a near perfect articulation of the process, the scars of de and re construction marked into the building itself. Even the name Uxmal—thought to mean *built three times*—seemed related. According to the Mayan calendar the city was to be rebuilt every 52 years and as a result buildings sat on top of buildings themselves on top of buildings. Thus, the remnants can be seen, primarily in doorways that seem to lead nowhere. Again, La Casa's covered doorways, filled in arches and reconstructed walls had relevance.

Furthermore, visiting Uxmal brought about the somewhat happenstantial recurrence of a figure I had made reference to in a presentation last year as part of a workshop with british artist and designer Paul Elliman. This figure was Eugene Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, and the reference I had made to him was a quote from his 1868 *Dictionnaire Raisonné*—"To restore a building is not to repair or reconstruct it; it is to reestablish it in a complete condition which may never have existed at any given moment."<sup>10</sup>

Viollet-le-Duc was renowned for his attempts to strip back buildings to their underlying structures, combining historical fact with creative modification along the way, most notably in his restoration of Notre Dame cathedral, in which he added an entirely new spire. In 1862 Viollet-le-Duc published *Cités et Ruines Américaines*, along with pioneering archaeologist and photographer Claude Joseph Désiré Charnay. The book contained Viollet-le-Duc's writings and

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<sup>10</sup> Viollet-le-Duc, E. *Dictionnaire Raisonné de L'Architecture Française du XIe au XVIe siècle*, 1868, p. 1

architectural diagrams on Militia, Palenqué, Izamal, Chichen-Itza and Uxmal alongside Char-nay's beautiful photographs of the ruins.



Viollet-le-Duc's notion of a restoration that sits somewhere between its former state and an entirely fictive state, calls to mind Werner Herzog's "ecstatic truth" and his view that "the so-called Cinema Verité is devoid of vérité. It reaches a merely superficial truth, the truth of accountants."<sup>11</sup> With Herzog's version of truth in mind, coupled with the reemergence of this Viollet-le-Duc quote, our intentions to rely on the subjective accounts of those involved with the La Casa and its history seemed all the more founded. As Hayden White notes in *The Content of Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, "historical narration without analysis is trivial, historical analysis without narration is incomplete."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Herzog, W. *Minnesota Declaration: Truth and Fact in Documentary Cinema*, April 30, 1999 at Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota, available online at: <http://filmvideo.walkerart.org/detail.wac?id=3286&title=articles>

<sup>12</sup> White, H. 'The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality' from *The Content of Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, 1987, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, Maryland, p.5

With this in mind we got in contact with Orlando Rivera, a former Yale student and a key member of the original Casa Boricua Inc. He was in fact responsible for choosing 301 Crown Street as the building to house their cultural centre. Moreover, having studied architecture and working as a developer / builder / architect Rivera was seen as a key figure to interview for both his insight into the architectural and social history of the building. We were able to exchange emails with Orlando and arranged a time for him to come to New Haven and take part in a walk-through interview in the space. Our intentions were to discuss minor structural changes in the space, both from his past experience, from the evidence we could glean from the foundations and architectural clues, and to quiz him on the events that led up to Casa Boricua taking over the building. Other conversations had given us somewhat differing accounts of the building's previous incarnations. While it was clear that it had initially been built as the residential Osterweis home, it was abandoned for a number of years prior to becoming the cultural centre in 1974. We had been told by one person that, during this time, it was an underground gay bar and by a number of others that due to its proximity to the Psychology Department, it had been a makeshift scientific testing facility. These speculative accounts were of course of interest and we were hoping to see if Orlando could verify or further these accounts.

In preparation of Orlando's visit I found myself coming up against issues I see as analogous to those of Mitchell Duneier in his book *Sidewalk*. As the only non-Latino member of our group I began to question whether I was informed enough about the history of Latinos at Yale. In the same way Hakan Hasan inquires in the "Afterword" of *Sidewalk*—"Can I expect Mitch, as a white sociologist to understand why that experience led me to work as a book vendor on Sixth Avenue in the first place?"<sup>13</sup> As Hasan further remarks, "the idea of race as a lived experience could not be avoided".

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<sup>13</sup> Duneier, M. *Sidewalk*, 1999, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, p.321

On October 23 Orlando made the trip to New Haven and we met him at 301 Crown Street. We gathered upstairs in a lounge room and began to talk, moving on to walk around the building to discuss some of the adaptations and idiosyncrasies in more detail. Orlando spoke at length on the events that led up to the move to 301 Crown Street and particularly how the then Yale president, Kingman Brewster, showed him around a number of disused buildings from which to choose. Orlando viewed 301 Crown Street as the best of a bad bunch and despite it being “dusty and dark” and in dire need of renovation, saw it as having potential and importantly plenty of space. In this initial visit to the building Orlando recounted how Kingman Brewster waited downstairs at the door while he took a look around and regaled us what he found to his surprise on the upper floor. Upon first entering he claimed the whole building smelt of ether, and when he reached the top floor he saw stacked lines of 5 gallon glass containers and recalled the smell being so potent that you felt yourself “starting to act like a rat.” He recalled continuing down the hallway to a room with a single chair sat in front of a two-way mirror and an observation room on the other side of the mirror. As he puts it, “I have this hallucinogenic liquid next to this room where people can just trip out in between rooms where people can just observe them tripping out. I don’t know what that’s about but that shit looks kind of suspicious to me.”

He went on to discuss Yale’s apparent involvement with birth control tests and to take us upstairs to where the *observation room* had been. This of course peaked our interest, we had been told by people that 301 Crown Street was involved in psychological testing whilst uninhabited and this was a fleshed out first-hand account for us to go on. This narrative provided us with the ideal opportunity to blend structural evidence with personal accounts perhaps distorted and shifted over time. Orlando’s subjectively charged account would certainly manifest in our installation; not simply a referential piece about the building’s past but more of a postscript to it. Similar to the achievements of artist Jeremy Deller’s *The Battle of Orgreave*. A

reconstruction of a 1980s miners' strike in England, he focused on the shifted first-hand accounts of those involved in the strikes and built his video piece on these sometimes warped accounts based on memory. As Tom Morton notes in his *Frieze* article on Deller, the project transcending being a piece just about the strikes and became "a part of its history, an epilogue to an experience."<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, the observatory tests that Orlando described are reminiscent of Stanley Milgram's infamous 1961 social psychology experiment *Obedience to Authority*. Undertaken whilst Milgram was a part of the Department of Psychology at Yale his experiments focused on the fragility of human nature, with participants divided into roles of *teacher* and *learner*. The focus of the test is on the *teacher* who is instructed to administer a *learning test* to the subject and to give them an electric shock should they answer wrong. The *teacher* is instructed to increase the voltage of this shock each time a question is answered incorrectly. Unbeknown to the *teacher* however, the *learner* is an actor and they are the one actually being studied—to see at what point they will refuse to obey the experimenter, to stop inflicting pain on the *learner*. In artist Rod Dickinson's faithful facsimile of Milgram's Yale Interaction Laboratory, part of his 2002 piece *The Milgram Re-Enactment* at the Centre for Contemporary Art, Glasgow, we see a room very similar to the one described by Orlando Rivera. Dickinson's reconstruction, a kind of re-enactment of a re-enactment, as Milgram's test itself was based on events that took place during the Holocaust, the audience are aware of the original test but now presented with further iterations. An accompanying pamphlet instructs viewers that they "will not be able to leave the space unless in the case of emergency" and as *Guardian* critic Elisabeth Mahoney notes, "you

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<sup>14</sup> Morton, T. "Mining for Gold: Jeremy Deller", *Frieze Magazine*, Issue 72, January-February 2003, available online at [http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/mining\\_for\\_gold/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/mining_for_gold/)

notice that the seats are viciously uncomfortable and that cameras are trained on the crowd”<sup>15</sup>  
to watch a piece that runs for 3 hours and 40 minutes.



In our final installation simple titled *301* Orlando Rivera’s account of the Milgram-esque tests are present; wound into structural interventions and perhaps most clearly in an audio piece. The interior frame of a wall, built by us, rests where an actual wall used to be in the original house, a small section of it covered by dry wall and a piece of two-way mirror inserted in it. Opposite the angled wall sits a single chair and beyond this wall, is another frame resting against an adapted wall structure that previously led to the stairway. Hung from this wall frame are

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<sup>15</sup> Mahoney, E. “If you think this looks boring...”, *Guardian*, 21 February 2002, available online at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2002/feb/21/artsfeatures2>



posters and photographs lifted, un-dusted and untouched from the basement. These elements are all in keeping with the starkly reductive feel of the space—by gutting the entire floor and adding only a few carefully considered elements we hope to draw attention to the quirks of adaptation and also bring about a sense of hiding and revealing. With the wall frames resting at a slight angle and exposed wooden beams there is an frailty about the space. The seemingly half-finished wall with the two-way mirror has an open frame built in to it but people seem hesitant to walk through it at first. We even installed a smaller piece of two-way mirror on another pre-existing wall, however it doesn't look through to anything. It gives the illusion that there is something to see on the other side, but all that's there is a wall; again this sense of hide and reveal continues.

In the side room painted doorways and removed doors are left as found and supplemented by white painted frames, found in the basement, used to highlight cracks and marks in the walls. There's a back and forth between elements we've introduced and idiosyncrasies pre-existing in the space that we wanted to keep. The overall result is a flattening of the building's three floors and of its specific history together in one space and time, all at once. The audio piece plays from the basement below echoing up into the space through the air vents. An attempt to literally bring Orlando's voice into the space without interrupting the reductive aesthetics of room. The audio consists of a 3 minute loop cut from a recording of the interview with Orlando. In the "Afterword" to Duneier's *Sidewalk* Hasan asks "how could I prevent him (Duneier) from appropriating me as mere data, from not giving me a voice in how the material in his book would be selected and depicted?"<sup>16</sup> Our response here; to use the voice verbatim. Admittedly it is altered slightly in the manner in which it is cut and how its is heard—echoing up through air vents dotted around the first floor, but his own wording is left untampered and raw. Here Orlando's

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<sup>16</sup> Duneier, M. *Sidewalk*, 1999, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, p.321

non-linear narrative runs throughout the space, intertwined with, rather than detached from the structural interventions introduced.

It seems difficult to evaluate the project as a success or failure, particularly from a directly involved point of view. However, for me it was an opportunity to really put into action some of the notions that have continued to inform my design work and some of the themes discussed in the context of our class. Working in a collaborative group of four, I feel allowed us to realise an ambitious project in a relatively short amount of time. Exploring recurring motifs of reconstruction, pulling together disparate elements in material consistency, has proved vital for my own design practise and allowed me to see these ideas play out at an exploded scale. Naturally working as a four, there was compromise but in hindsight I feel everyone's hand can be seen in the final installation.

## Images

1. Photograph of finished installtion 301. Taken by Richard Choi
2. Google Street View Image of 301 Crown Street
3. 1911 Sanborn map of 301 Crown Street
4. Photograph of Uxmal, Yucatan, Mexico. Taken by Andrew Lister
5. Photographic Plate 35. "Maison du Nain, a Uxmal". West face, 1859-60. Taken by Claude Joseph Désiré Charnay. Published in Cités et Ruines Américaines, 1862
6. Photograph of finished installtion 301. Taken by Richard Choi
7. Photograph of finished installtion 301. Taken by Richard Choi

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