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CASTING CARE: THE WALLS OF WALMER YARD

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ABSTRACT

Through words and castings, I explore the walls of Walmer Yard — a housing scheme in Notting Hill designed by Peter Salter and turned into a house museum upon its completion in 2018.

These casts and the words that accompany them explore the significance of unintended moments within Walmer Yard which, as Keeper and Resident of Walmer Yard, I saw every day. They act to reinforce the experience of caring for the building — of cleaning walls, tending to space, and curating — and sit it aside that of caring for the building through the designing and making of the architectural space.

This paper explores in greater depths how the building, the casting of it, and the words placed aside these casts, can act to record the care of myself as caretaker, curator, and resident in the experience of these moments in the walls of Walmer Yard. As I progress through the paper each cast is accompanied by a series of poetic words which begin to evoke memories of the spaces' enclosure and recollections associated with my roles within the houses.

INTRODUCTION

Through words and castings, I have been exploring the walls of Walmer Yard — a housing scheme in Notting Hill designed by Peter Salter and turned into a house museum upon its completion in 2018.¹

Poetic lines and jesmonite casts have been used to explore different moments of Walmer Yard. The casts have been made where the texture isn't quite as the architects would have intended, mostly down to issues with the shuttering or the casting of the concrete. They record the imperfections. Many visiting the building might not notice these or may see them as intended details; some of them became intentional as the architect acted to disrupt the notion of an imperfection or mistake by bringing them to the fore, extending the initially unintended finish to other areas of the walls.

These casts and the words that accompany them explore what is significant about these unintended moments which, as Keeper and Resident of Walmer Yard, I saw every day. They act to reinforce the experience of caring for the building — of cleaning walls, tending to space, and curating — and sit it aside caring for the building through the designing and making of the architectural space.

At Walmer Yard I held many roles.² These can roughly be defined as Keeper, Curator, Landlord, Resident, Public Programmer, Archivist, Tour Guide, Cleaner, Maintenance Worker, Project Manager, Editor, and Academic.³ Through my writings I will explore the different positionalities of these roles and how by playing out these responsibilities my relationship to the building changed, with the casts acting as a starting point and as a prompt. For me these casts have been a way of carrying out a close reading of the building's fabric and relating it to my positionality and care roles in the context of the building.

This paper will explore in greater depths how the building, the casting of it, and the words placed aside these casts, can act to record the care of myself as caretaker (and curator and resident) in these moments I experienced in the walls of Walmer Yard. As I progress through the paper each cast will be accompanied by a series of poetic words which begin to evoke memories of the spaces' enclosure and recollections associated with my roles within the houses.

1 Walmer Yard is a development of four houses situated in London's Notting Hill. It was designed by the acclaimed architect Peter Salter alongside Fenella Collingridge and commissioned by the developer Crispin Kelly. It was completed in 2018 and became the home of the Baylight Foundation — a charity which focused on how we experience architecture.

2 I was employed as Keeper of Walmer Yard from 2018 to 2023. This role initially was more curatorial and involved developing the public programme but it also encompassed preparing the house for guests or visitors and running regular tours. In 2020 I moved into the houses and became a resident. During the pandemic my role expanded to take on maintenance, cleaning, managing of volunteers and staff, and later a landlord to the tenants who moved in during September and October 2020.

3 The term Keeper was originally chosen for the role in discussion with Crispin Kelly. The term custodian had also been mooted. Keeper was chosen in relation to the title which had historically been used in museums for a curator responsible for a particular collection; in this case my collection was the four houses of Walmer Yard.

COURTYARD / CARETAKER / KEEPER



Fingers pressed into rounded grooves
Fluted concrete marks the moment
Between inside and outside
Pass over this threshold
Where wood meets stone
Public meets private

Peter Salter's drawings depict a man with his hand outstretched, his fingers the width of these grooves in the wall.⁴ Like in the wall lights of House Three, which are the size and shape of Peter's forearm, the body has been used as the measure. Surrounding the threshold of the front door, this fluted concrete acts as a moment to pause.

A concrete bench runs along the wall next to the door. Here I rest my bags down while I unlock the door, or I sit for a coffee, or on summer nights a glass of wine. It is on this bench that many conversations have taken place. Sandwiches eaten with contractors on hot summer days, a quick break from work, a moment to discuss schedules or the right way to approach a detail. I stand on this bench to demonstrate the moveable shuttering, my body reaching to heave the oak shutters from one side to another.

It is in the courtyard where I welcome guests into the development. Through the brass and black steel gate, scores of students and architects pass before funneling up the Roach Bed, Portland stone stairs below a low sky-blue-painted overhang. Then they arrive at the courtyard and the space opens — a surprise of colour, texture, and height. Each house is carefully arranged around this central space.

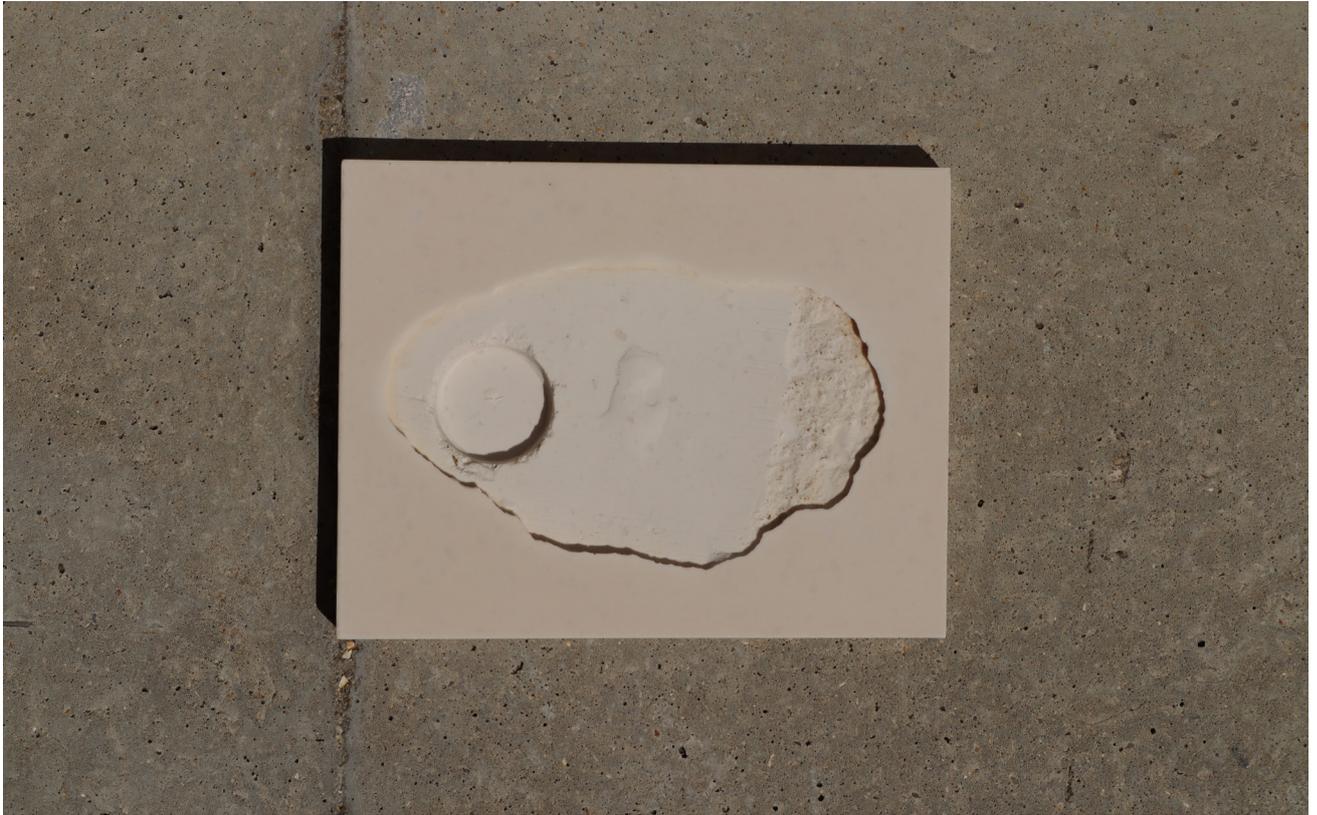
Here I begin the tours, my small stature engulfed by the height of the houses which, at points, tower five stories above. I wave at the children in House Three as they shout my name from the balcony of the bedroom or knock on the window of the living room in excitement. A neighbour stands in the open window and shouts down a hello, arranging plans for a drink later. It adds to the feeling of communal occupation, offering a warm story to the tour gathered down below.

It is also in this courtyard that I have worked until my body aches. The leaves drop from the protected tree to the southeast of the site; an autumnal downpour of

gold blocking the drains and piling up in the corners and voids. I sweep, collect into bags, and leave them on the street to be collected by the council. I scrape the fluffy seeds from the grates using a knife from the kitchen drawer as my makeshift tool. I jet wash the green stains that cling to the overshadowed concrete of the benches. There is much deliberation over whether this should be cleaned: Crispin likes it to be cleaned, resisting the patina of time; Peter revels in the growing stains and marks which come with the aging of the building. The oak timber blocks of the floor are beginning to age too. Some are bleached by the sun while one has been infiltrated with moisture and turned rotten inside. Just one, by the entrance to House Three. Their pushchair catches on it. I apologise to tour groups who somehow always manage to find this one imperfection. Embarrassed by this moment of decay or my lack of ability to fix this one 10 cm³ of building.

4 Peter Salter, *Drawing Walmer Yard*, ed. by Matthew Travers (Piano Nobile, 2016).

STAIRS / CURATOR



200 bouncy balls have

 cascaded

 down

 these

 stairs

A raucous cacophany of

 plummeting

 rubber

The deafening sound of hard plastic against steel

The feet

 follow

 them

Echoing as they

 touch

 each

 step

But the walls remain silent as if listening

Concrete and timber not party to the reverberations

It is when on these stairs that I remember the first event I curated at Walmer Yard.⁵ Dusk on a warm spring evening. The moment when the houses started to glow orange from the warmth of the artificial lights inside. The audience of more than one hundred and twenty people gathered outside in the courtyard with a mood of anticipation. Then the first thuds began to ring out, hardly decipherable over the hushed courtyard conversations. But then more. Thud... Thud... Thud dum dum dum, until the sounds had begun to merge into each other. From the courtyard it felt like the building was heaving from within. From inside a colourful mess of feet, bodies, and bouncy balls, two hundred of which had been simultaneously dropped from the top of the four-storey staircase, gaining momentum as they plummeted into the dark depths of the building. I imagine the journey of one of the balls as it bounces from the harsh cold steel of the stairs to smooth curve of the concrete wall. Perhaps in a moment of perfect precision it even hits one of the timber plugs which mark the points where scaffold poles held formwork together. The sounds ring out. Bodies followed down the stairs each bouncing their own rubber ball, occasionally swapping between players of the building. And then as all bodies and balls reached the bottom, silence.⁶

In Ovid's epic *Metamorphoses*, Actaeon is punished for gazing on the goddess Diana as she bathes. Here, in a translation of the myth of Actaeon, a cluster of ice sculptures were suspended at the top of the dark stairwell. As they melt, drops fall into the void of the staircase, guided by a latex filter. Their sounds — the sounds of droplets — are captured with microphones and played back into the space. The eerie sound of water and dripping fills the staircase echoing around its steel treads. Visitors are immersed in another world. Darkness and sound engulf them as they explore the relationship between myth, transformation, and identity.⁷

The stairs can seem a dark and foreboding place. When I first began working at Walmer Yard, these stairs would give me a feeling of unease. When entering at the bottom, the sound of your footsteps reverberates through the space. It can sound like another person is in the space. Like you are not alone.

From the top, when you look down all you see is darkness. It became a space to hide things. The mess of everyday life, event paraphernalia, or maintenance work would be pushed into the void underneath the bottom of the stairs, hidden from visitors' prying eyes.

5 This was in April 2018 while working at the Royal Academy of Arts. The event, entitled 'Experiencing Architecture: Inviting Dialogue', which I curated as part of the RA's public programme, was the first to be held in the partially completed Walmer Yard. It invited choreographers, dancers, musicians, and composers to create works for the space which would change the audience's experience of the building. For more information, see: <<https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/event/experiencing-architecture-inviting-dialogue>>.

6 This piece was a performance by the London-based choral collective Musarc who attempted to use the materiality of the building to play the plan. In this piece the group dropped bouncy balls down the reverberative stairwell while the audience listened from the courtyard outside. See: <<https://www.musarc.org/2017-18/experiencing-architecture-inviting-dialogue/>>.

7 This was a work installed in the staircase in collaboration with first year students at the Bartlett School of Architecture in 2020. See: <<https://summer2020.bartlettarchucl.com/year-1/metamorphosis>>.

STAIRS / CURATOR



The air is hot and sticky
I place my body against the cool steel
I feel the weld against my skin
It leaves a mark as I peel away my back
I am marked by the wall

Peter described the bathroom's visible welds as like those on farm machinery or on a tractor.⁸ They run down the waxed steel walls of the bathroom like a straight line of stitches. Sometimes they are rough to touch. Unfinished yet purposefully there. They contrast with the smooth steel of the bathroom wall which engulfs my bedroom's ensuite. It is on this wall where I can personalise my space. These walls are forgiving. Not like the clay plaster which crumbles and marks with knocks from furniture or the fair-faced concrete where a mark drilled will be forever in its surface. Magnets hold photographs of my nephews' pulling faces at the camera, postcards from friends visiting faraway places, and pictures collected from exhibition visits. There are photographs of Albanian singers in the hillside near Tirana from a visit in 2018, a painting of a Renaissance mother cradling her child sent to me by Peter at Christmas, and a photo of a group of nuns smoking that I've carried around with me since university. Through this small gesture of a few images placed on the wall I can create a sense of a place that is mine. An unusual place that was for a time my home.

This steel wall also offers protection from the outside. Behind it I am hidden from view and shaded from the prying eyes of the street. On the street I can hear architects discussing the building. I've begun to recognise the muffled sounds of their voices as they drift in through my bedroom window which sits above the front gate. I know that when I go downstairs, their noses will be pressed against the glass of my kitchen windows. In the kitchen I am unable to hide from them or pretend I am not home.

* * *

In this paper I have attempted to record moments and memories within Walmer Yard. These are memories of my occupation and of the different roles I have played within the building, prompted by the casts of textures of the walls enclosing these spaces.

It is a process which perhaps has no end and which I see as ongoing. Each cast produces further recollections of the space and my close relationship to it — a caretaker of the building's fabric.

Each cast prompts more words and connections. They become a way of reading the space, which many have placed their own interpretations upon but nobody else has held these roles or even occupied it in this way, connecting the experience of the building and its textures, shadows, and materiality to particular memories of care.

8 Peter Beardsall and others, *Peter Salter: Walmer Yard* (Circa, 2019).

RESPONSE TO LAURA MARK'S WORK / BY
ADRIANA LAURA MASSIDDA

i chose to respond to your paper by sharing the landscape

of

(you could call it a mental chart)

that i drew for my own navigation as i was (re)reading it

there are 3 spheres of action in the text,

through which 3 practices take place

in relation to specific objects & notions

& the method of casting,

all this condensed in the 3 main sections

Across all the dimensions the text / you / open(s) up,

i would like to focus on the tripartite notion of

curating / healing / curing

(as in the 3 possible translations of the Spanish verb 'curando')

& the idea of imperfection

as it is central to the piece

the text speaks about

curating

the imperfection

*because you let us know that unintended behaviours of
the building material(s) were foregrounded*

by the architects

made into features

because there may be a moment when you foreground the rot in the timber yourself

(without a sense of embarrassment; without need for apologies)

(the text also speaks about)

healing

through imperfection

because the dripping of the melting figures in the staircase

& all the other interventions based on Ovidio's Metamorphoses

that the group of Bartlett students produced

are talking about ways in which space can heal human anxiety & fear

the installations

Lyke the

the installations conjure

fear (such as of darkness and cold),

loss (as in Eurydice's myth),

pride, unrequited love and desire.

and especially your text also speaks about

curing

for imperfection

(as in curing concrete)

because the act of watering the concrete as it hardens

is an act of care

it requires perseverance

it involves attention

example, of the constructor as she

checks temperature.

By curing the concrete,

the constructor seeks to avoid cracks & weaknesses

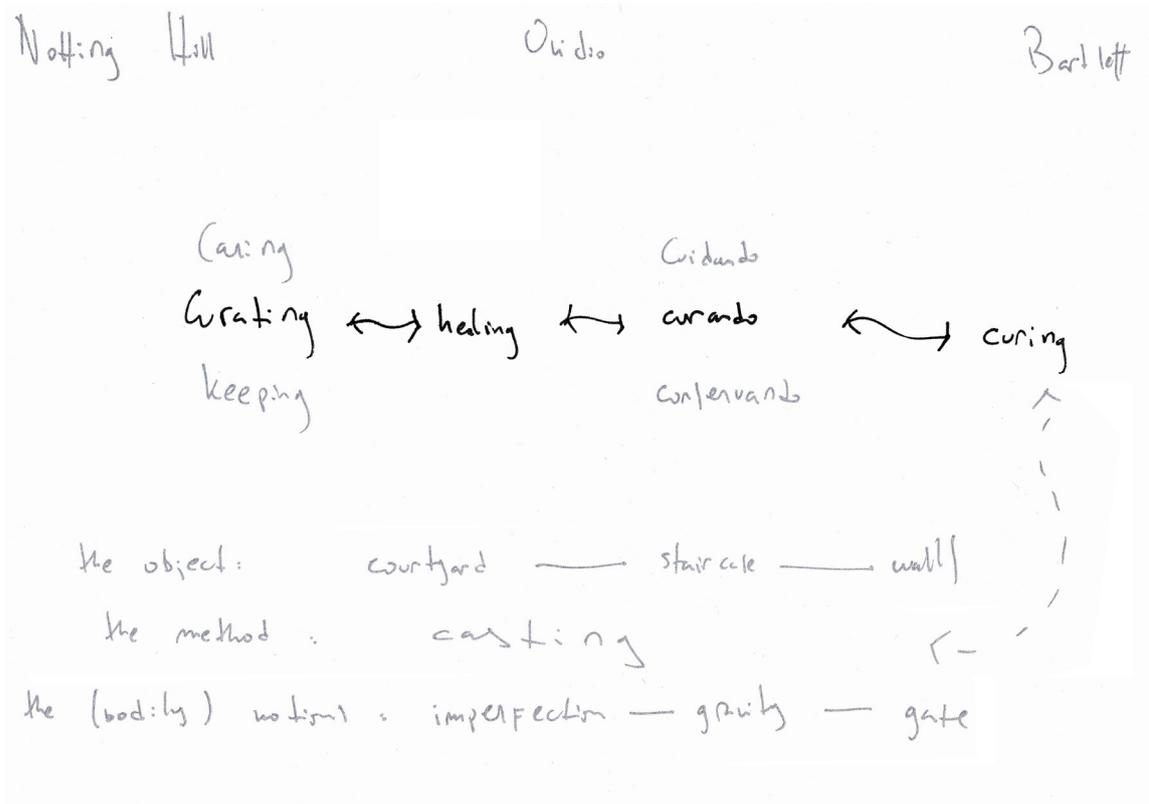
but she also works with a liquid material known to copy the imperfections of the

mould

(just) as you do in your casting.

Your act of casting, healing, curating the imperfection is an act of care

*& i wanted to say thank you
for having shared it with us.*



AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Laura Mark

Laura Mark is an award-winning architecture critic, curator, editor, and researcher. Laura is undertaking a PhD at Newcastle University which considers the care and maintenance of domestic spaces through an autoethnographic study of the house museum, with a particular focus on her time as Keeper at Walmer Yard. Laura is currently Head of Casework at the C20 Society. Before joining the C20 Society, Laura co-led the undergraduate first year at Sheffield School of Architecture and taught humanities and research courses throughout the undergraduate and masters programmes. She has previously taught at the Bartlett School of Architecture, University of Greenwich, the Birmingham School of Architecture and Design, and Sweden's UMEA University. Trained as an architect, Laura worked in architectural practice before joining the editorial team of the *Architects' Journal*. She has also held curatorial positions at both Walmer Yard and the Royal Academy of Arts.

