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# Magic realist architecture: three buildings by Robert Morris-Nunn

RICHARD BLYTHE

This paper identifies magic realist tendencies in the architecture of Robert Morris-Nunn evident in three exemplary buildings of different types: the *Strahan Visitor Centre*, a tourist information building; *Corumbene*, a home for the frail aged; and the *Forest Industries Headquarters*, a corporate office. In these projects, described as magic realist by author Richard Flanagan,<sup>1</sup> architectural fragments are arranged within larger 'container buildings' as pieces of a contrived 'internal world', condensed cultural landscapes which engage memory. From an architectural standpoint these buildings are confronting. They ignore conventional orders, reject modernism's minimalist aesthetic, and are not easily intellectualised.

The interiors of these buildings constitute a strange or altered reality. They are implausible exterior worlds contained beneath vaulting gyprock skies (fig.1). These Dulux blue heavens are reminiscent of the exotic interior worlds of atmospheric theatres in which escapist realms are created to enhance the illusive experience of moving pictures. They suggest distance, both cultural and physical, between the real, every-day world recently left behind on the city street outside and the fantastic world of the theatre. The aim of the atmospheric theatre is escapist fancy. Morris-Nunn, however, strives for replacement through imagination. He imaginatively re-arranges fragments of reality as images

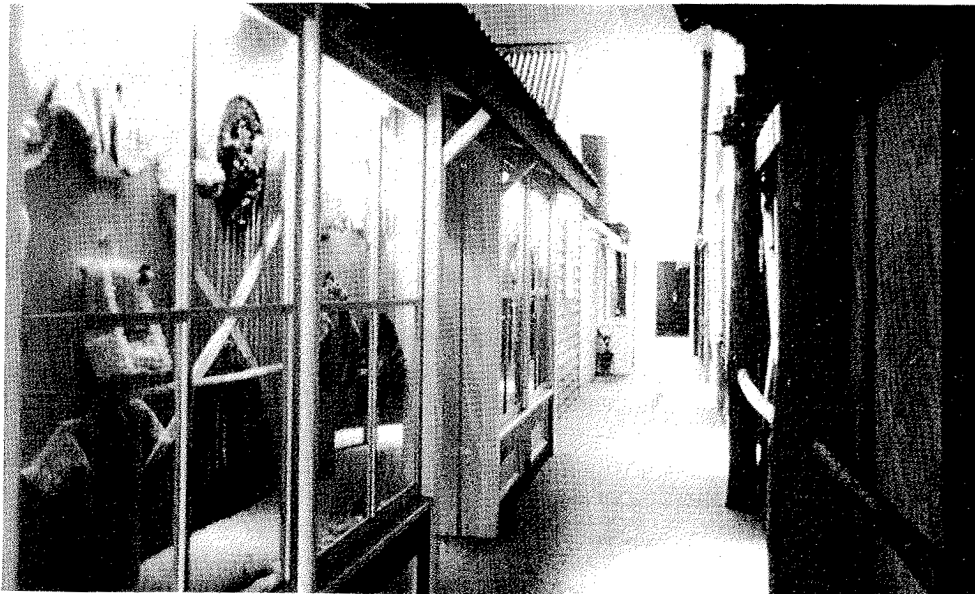


Fig.1, Robert Morris-Nunn, *Corumbene*, interior circulation space, 1997, New Norfolk, Tasmania, photograph: Richard Blythe

shopping, or cook a meal, or visit friends. The site is, however, undergoing significant re-structuring because of contemporary interest in de-institutionalising the care of the mentally impaired and the subsequent integration of many previously institutionalised functions within main-stream society. Part of this process involves looking for new uses for the flagging establishment. The relocation of the *Corumbene* aged care facility to the Royal Derwent site formed part of this process of reclamation and transformation. Magic realism is an appropriate architectural strategy in this context.

Despite typological connections with the site's dark and legendary past, Morris-Nunn's *Corumbene* is experienced as a layering of curious and delightful landscapes which is due partly to his wish to enoble the residents of his buildings. This approach arises out of his deep regard for the dignity of human life born out of first hand experience of institutionalised hospital care. His architecture is similar in this respect to Spanish magical realist paintings that also portray nobility through humble imagery. Diego Velázquez's painting entitled *An Old Woman Cooking Eggs*, 1620 (Museum of Scotland) is a fine example of magic realist traits evident in earlier Spanish painting depicting nobility in people of humble status and also in humble objects.<sup>9</sup> In this painting the shared humility of the characters and the food being cooked reminds the viewer of the essential connection of food and life. Morris-Nunn does not focus on planning strategies for streamlining the care process in his aged care facilities, nor on the convenient separation of different levels of care. He uses a resident-centred approach to create environments that might be regarded as 'home' in a manner cognisant of the depth of the emotional ether manifest in that concept. He acknowledges the essential connection between resident and home. A positive, caring community is enhanced by juxtapositions of fragments of the common cultural landscape,

Fig.2, Robert Morris-Nunn, *Corumbene*, interior circulation space, 1997, New Norfolk, Tasmania, photograph: Richard Blythe





humble architectural fragments, which result in images 'which strike deep resonant notes in people's collective memories' (fig.2).<sup>10</sup> Morris-Nunn subscribes to the philosophy of 'aging in place'. That is, when a person enters a home they are allocated a permanent 'place' and no division is made between nursing and hostel sections to enable residents to remain in one place in the event of deteriorating health. The memorable, the familiar, and a sense of permanency work together to establish the personal over the institutional, the humble over the grand. Although Morris-Nunn's sometimes awkward buildings could not be described as 'noble Architecture', his buildings respond to the lives and life stories of the occupants and in so doing reveal a nobility inherent in all humanity.

Morris-Nunn's concern for the individual is also evident in his corporate projects. His design of new offices for Forestry Tasmania (fig.3) in Hobart is simultaneously a successful corporate image and an intriguing place rich in individual experience. The architectural focus of the project is a simulated rain forest which forms the entrance space for the institution. The damp, sweet smell of fecund forest litter creates a contrast with the inner-city atmosphere of one of Hobart's greyer streets. The sensual experience of this threshold space triggers buried memories of real forest experiences for those who have had the privilege.

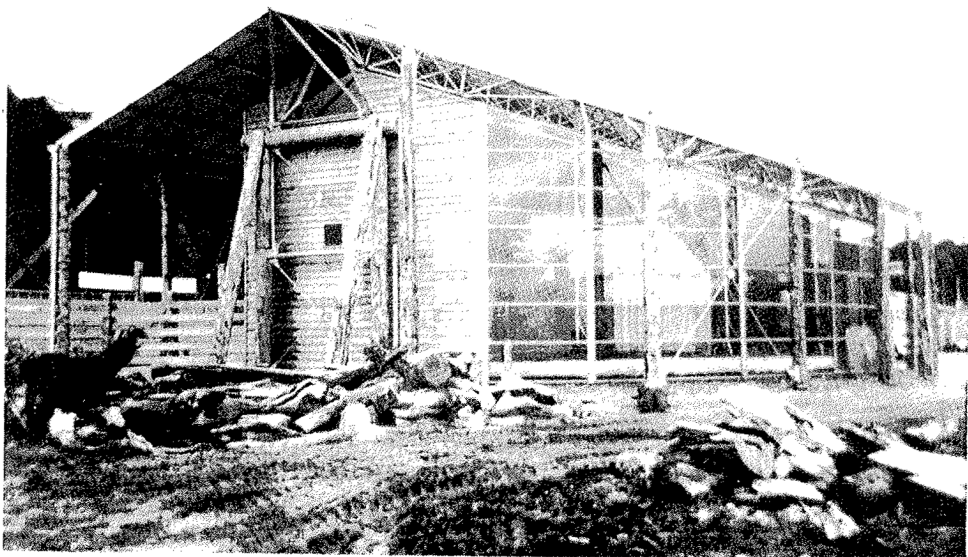
Fig.3, Robert Morris-Nunn, *Forest Industry Headquarters*, entry foyer under main dome, 1998, Hobart, Tasmania, photograph: Richard Blythe



This marvellous interior world works as both corporate symbol and personal revelation, a corporate foyer with such popular appeal that it has been requested as a wedding venue.

Morris-Nunn's regard for the value of the individual is evident in the way in which the *Strahan Visitor Centre* was put together, in particular the making of the piners' hut (fig.4). The West Coast town of Strahan is famous for its links to the rivers of the south west from where the Huon Pine was traditionally harvested. Men would head up the rivers in small punts on long, lonely and exhausting trips collecting Huon Pine logs which they would float back down the river for milling. Richard Flanagan, included on the design team for the *Strahan Visitor Centre* in the role of interpretation designer and historian, tells such a story in his novel *Death of a River Guide* (1994). The story of these piners is an important aspect of the history of Strahan and it was decided that it could be portrayed by reconstructing a piners' hut as an exhibit. Rather than creating a simulation based on historical information, the last surviving piners were engaged to construct a 'real' piners' hut. Part of the quality of these huts, according to the piners, was the aromatic effects of smoke from their cooking fires, so, when construction was complete, the piners spent several nights in the hut, lighting real fires and drinking real beer. Without layering the structure with this lived experience, they felt the hut would lack authenticity. They placed their beer bottles by the corner at the rear when it was installed within the reconstructed rainforest, next to the reconstructed stream, inside the Visitor Centre just as they would have done had the hut been in a real forest and had they been on a real pining expedition. Umberto Eco's ideas about hyperrealities and his critical comments on the

Fig.4, Robert Morris-Nunn, *Strahan Visitor Centre*, exterior container building (the Piners' hut is visible through the glass wall), 1992, Strahan, Tasmania, photograph: Richard Blythe



advertising slogans 'more' and 'the real thing' in connection with American atmospheric museums might be raised as criticisms. Hyperreality is, however, avoided due to the authenticity of the piners' actions and the dignity afforded them by the inclusion of their actions in the history recording process. Their positive engagement in the process constituted a public recognition of their values.<sup>11</sup> They made the history (in part) and also its representation and were thus empowered to claim their heritage.

Morris-Nunn juxtaposes simulations and fragments of real environments, both built and natural; simulated buildings, real buildings (like the piners' hut at Strahan), boats, streams, trees, and forests. Yet to set these items one against the other would not necessarily result in the magical qualities found in a Morris-Nunn interior. In his nursing homes, as in the atmospheric theatre, it is the featureless blue sky, from which an entire village is conjured, which establishes the sense of other-worldliness and which is also comparable to the qualities of magic realist painting. For example, the mysterious effect of Juan Sánchez Cotán's painting of realistic edibles, *Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber*, c.1602 (San Diego Museum of Art), which is dependant on the featureless black background

against which these life-like objects are placed.<sup>12</sup> The reality of the depiction of these edibles and the ambiguity of their context establishes a dichotomy that is an important essence of magic realism,<sup>13</sup> a dichotomy that is present also in Morris-Nunn's architecture as exterior container building and interior world.

Morris-Nunn's use of this dichotomy between reality and ambiguity is comparable with the magic realist novels of Gabriel García Márquez in which Márquez relies on an initial establishment of objectivity through third person narration in order that the magical may be read as a reality, rather than fantastic.<sup>14</sup>

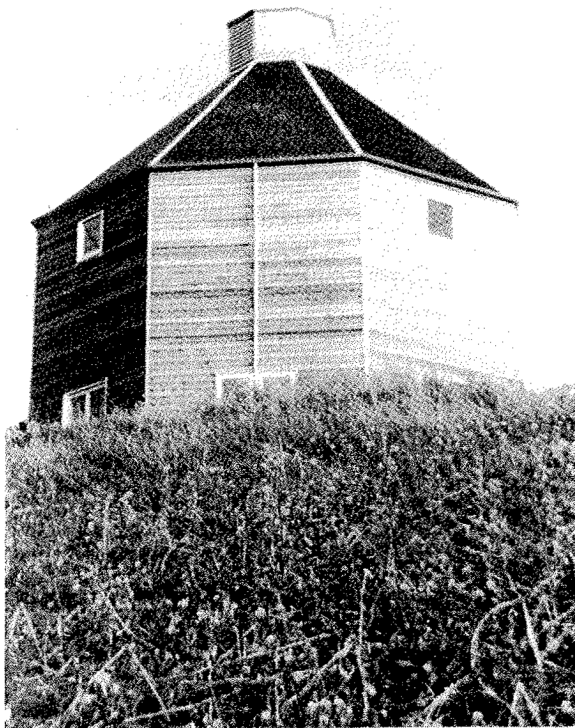


Fig.5, Robert Morris Nunn, *Corumbene*, exterior container building modelled on a local hop kiln, 1997, New Norfolk, Tasmania, photograph: Richard Blythe

Morris-Nunn's magical interiors are contained within buildings which, through their architectural normalcy, establish a legitimacy which prefigures a reading of the interior. At *Corumbene* the container building (fig.5) is modelled on the dramatic form of hop kilns, conspicuous objects in the cultural landscape of New Norfolk. The container is therefore familiar and achieves the objectivity necessary for presenting the magical in a believable manner – the believability of a hop kiln in the landscape of New Norfolk is 'carried over' to a reading of *Corumbene's* magical interior world. At the *Strahan Visitor Centre*, despite the eclectic nature of the container, the architectural functions of support and enclosure are clearly readable, establishing this building's normalcy. At the *Forest Industries Headquarters*, a magical forest is contained within an architectural archetype – the dome – appropriate for achieving normalcy within its urban context (fig.6). It is this seamless integration of 'real' and 'dream' worlds which establishes Morris-Nunn's architecture as essentially magic realist, bringing meaning to the dichotomy inherent in the oxymoron 'magic realism'.<sup>15</sup>

The fragment in Morris-Nunn's interiors may be read as an allusion to lost youth, a referent to life in some other place. This nostalgic allusion may be compared with the expression of modernity as 'irrevocable loss, poignant regret for a lost totality, a vanished wholeness' evident in Henry Fuseli's sepia wash *The Artist Overwhelmed by the Grandeur of Antique Ruins*, 1778-79 (location unknown) that is typical of modernity's use of fragmentation as a trope of disorder.<sup>16</sup> Morris-Nunn's use of fragmentation is also motivated, however, by the intention to replace the residents of his architecture by honouring their stories and giving them presence. This act of re-placement is a compensation, a desire to re-establish the wholeness of life lost through the atrophy of the aging process. The inclusion of

Fig.6, Robert Morris-Nunn, *Forest Industry Headquarters*, exterior container building – a dome set in an urban context, 1998, Hobart, Tasmania, photograph: Richard Blythe

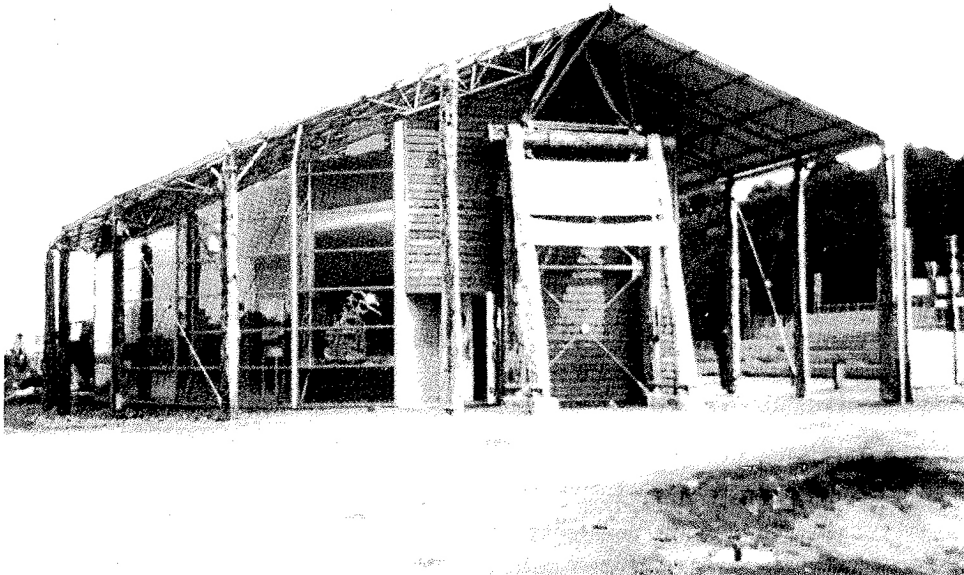


fragments of a common cultural landscape allude also to a reality or wholeness of greater substance. From the time of the French Revolution, the fragment could be conceived as a positive trope: 'The fragment, for the Revolution and its artists, rather than symbolising nostalgia for the past, enacts the deliberate destruction of the past, or at least, a pulverisation of what were perceived to be its repressive traditions'.<sup>17</sup> At the *Strahan Visitor Centre*, a fragmented 1960's suburban Australian house was installed to represent the changing environmental values of middle-class Australia which led to the political victory of the 'No Dams' protest (fig.7); a positive reading of the fragment for those of greener persuasion.

The fragmented interiors of Morris-Nunn's aged care facilities may also be read as a reclamation of the value of the individual and the 'home' from the institution. For those fearing the inevitability of institutionalised care, the symbolic pulverisation of the institution through fragmentation is a positive trope. Morris-Nunn's fragmented interiors for the aged are an alembic, enlivening past memories in a bid towards a reconciliation of the disenfranchised condition of the aged who have been confined to a heterotopia of both crisis and deviance.

Represented in the interior of the *Strahan Visitor Centre* are: rainforest; aboriginal histories; the Hydro Electric Commission; piners; greenies; and even suburbia. The enveloping 'shed' also demonstrates this tendency: mine gantry; protest banner; glass exhibition building. The wall facing the street is lined in curved boards like a clinker built boat, and the ridge beam, a complex curved steel truss pinned at each end to the supporting timber gantries, carries the same structural significance as the keel of a hull. Like Saleem, the principle character of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, this small building becomes the embodiment of the history of Strahan, 'handcuffed' to it, linked both 'literally and

Fig.7, Robert Morris-Nunn, *Strahan Visitor Centre*, exterior container building, 1992, Strahan, Tasmania, photograph: Richard Blythe



metaphorically, both actively and passively'.<sup>18</sup> Like his chutney, this building constitutes a critique of history:

*...if you are skilled at incorporating 'memories, dreams, ideas' into your chutney, and possess 'above all a nose capable of discerning the hidden languages of what-must-be-pickled', you may, like Saleem, create magic through the mimetic, in a 'chutnification of history; the grand hope of the pickling of time!'*<sup>19</sup>

The *Strahan Visitor Centre*, is indeed, a jar of pickles. This allusion to something beyond the fragment is also characteristic of a will toward totalisation, a bringing together of the disintegrative effects of modern experience in a higher unity. Such a totalisation was achieved by Cézanne in his painting, *Still Life with Plaster Cupid*, 1895 (location unknown) in which art is conceived 'as a joining up of unrelated fragments in a pictorial totality'. The painting includes figures of both love and suffering indicating that '...modernity is indeed marked by the will toward totalisation as much as it is metaphorized by the fragment'.<sup>20</sup> The *Strahan Visitor Centre* is a totalisation of a small-town world divided by race, politics and now tourism. It is a 'chutnification' of the values and memories of a place five times transformed.

For Morris-Nunn, built form is viewed and understood not so much by the physical senses, as through a layering of myths, memories and meanings. He makes buildings according to the same principles Simon Schama develops in his reading of the landscape which, Schama says, '... is the work of the mind...built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock'.<sup>21</sup> Morris-Nunn's architecture, then, is built on memory, the spatial delights of his work are not found in physical dimensions or functional analysis but in the space of memory. This is particularly the case in his aged care designs for which memory becomes the organising criteria. The opening paragraph to Morris-Nunn's brochure promoting his approach reads:

*People as they age often reflect on their own personal experiences of life. As aging progresses, the memories remain of what they did in the happiest, more secure days of their lives. For those with dementia, the incidents of the last few days or even minutes are quickly forgotten but not the events of 20 [sic] or more years ago. People start to live in and through their memories of their former life. It is with these observations that we wish to start with the design of a new facility for the frail aged.*<sup>22</sup>

Morris-Nunn arranges architectural fragments, sometimes real and sometimes illusory, to illicit memories through common images. At the *Strahan Visitor Centre* a real building, the piners' hut, is 'transposed directly'. Similarly, at *Corumbene*, this appropriation of real fragments results in the inclusion of an actual hop picker's hut moved bodily from its rural stumps and grafted to the new interior. The act of direct transposition extends to gardens and plants. Species with nostalgic value and scented plants, which add an olfactory stimulant to the sensual conjuring of memories, are used.<sup>23</sup> The fabric of these illusionary worlds is then partly real but so to is the theme behind their conception. The illusionist world created at *Corumbene* 'recreates the world of a small rural township based



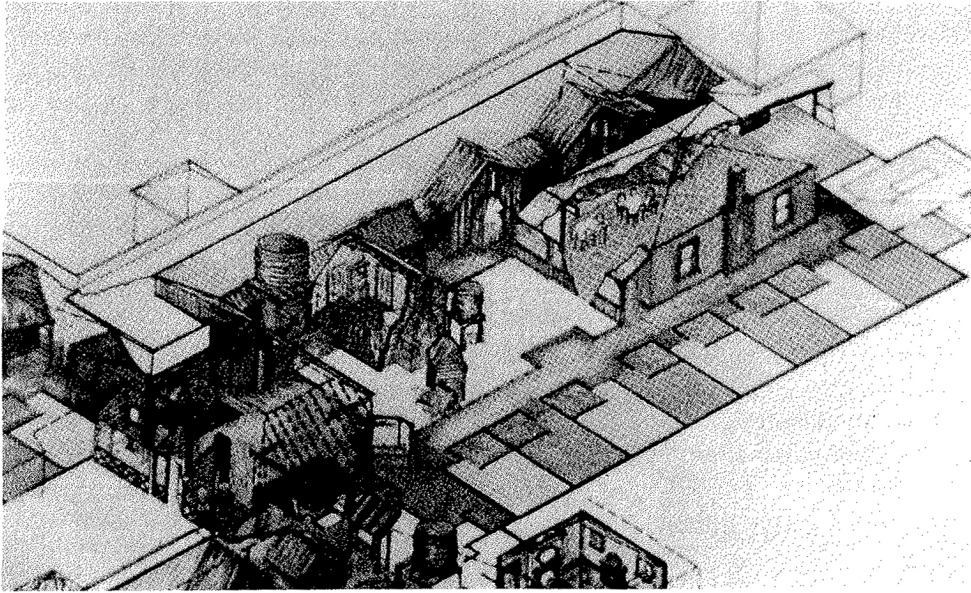


Fig.8, Robert Morris-Nunn, *Corumbene*, axonometric of residential wing showing simple plan layout, 1997, photograph: Richard Blythe

on hop growing, which was the basis of the livelihood of the whole community'.<sup>24</sup> At the *Strahan Visitor Centre* a totalisation of the history of a diverse community is attempted. These imaginative worlds are therefore more than just escapist fantasy. They are the physical stuff of memory, the substance of long term memories that are the solace of the aging and the destination for their day-dreaming. The value of the illusion is therefore, not in its powers to delude residents into believing that they are in another place, but rather in the creative act of remembrance that the illusion inspires. Those fragments which are not real are in a sense empty in that they do not possess an actual history. They are, however, sufficiently similar (visually and texturally) to buildings that do constitute actual or real histories to evoke real memories. Morris-Nunn is not then a manufacturer of clichéd public memories but a conjurer of individual and particular memories. His fragmented interiors are like the magician's hat, and by architectural slight of hand personal and real memories emerge from actual histories in the minds of the residents. It is perhaps because of the very emptiness of the fragments, the absence of particular histories, that they are so evocative. These fragments are void of their own history enabling each individual to invest them with a personal history. They offer no resistance to such an appropriation since they are empty in the first place.<sup>25</sup> Unlike Disneyland, however, these sets are imaginative rather than imaginary since they refer to realities once experienced rather than fanciful and imaginary worlds of which the inhabitants have had no direct experience.

At *Corumbene* a simple and economical plan carries visually complex building fragments arranged internally as a series of façades. Bathrooms are paired and project into the 'street' space framing entry spaces to each pair of rooms and create urban walls which front onto circulation 'streets' (figs 8, 9). Göttfried Semper's

architectonic notion of the wall as '...a means to make the "home", the inner life separated from the outer life' is subverted in the ensuing tension between the real and the remembered but also expanded to encompass the social separation of the private and public realm within the institution.<sup>26</sup> Morris-Nunn's 'street' wall is suffused with the magical power of a row of precious mantelpiece pictures, each one a gateway or threshold of a memory world. The texture of old wood, the smell of rusty iron and the water tank, the remembered snap of a rabbit trap now hanging idle, give sensual substance to visual clues and to each passing day-dream. To enter a Morris-Nunn building is to enter a world of memories and to revisit the places seminal in the constitution of self because, while the triggers or 'gateways' to these worlds may be common across a community of occupants, each journey is individual. These illusionary thresholds to remembered places create an illusionist layering of time in Morris-Nunn's buildings, an instant palimpsest which, like the mind, works 'through partly remembered fragments and their sudden combinations'. They constitute a breach of traditional time, typ-

ical of Foucault's heterotopia, through which organisational depth is achieved.<sup>27</sup> Morris-Nunn's layering of thresholds to remembered places is a temporal succession corresponding to a subjective experiential present in which space is ordered by the creative act of remembrance rather than by dimensional proportion or functional program.

Robert Morris-Nunn's buildings share significant characteristics with magic realist painting and literature. At *Corumbene*, the architecture becomes a vehicle of reaction in a time of crisis for those disenfranchised by the processes of aging. The fragmented interiors can be read as a pulverisation of the institution. In all three buildings addressed in this paper, each humble fragment of

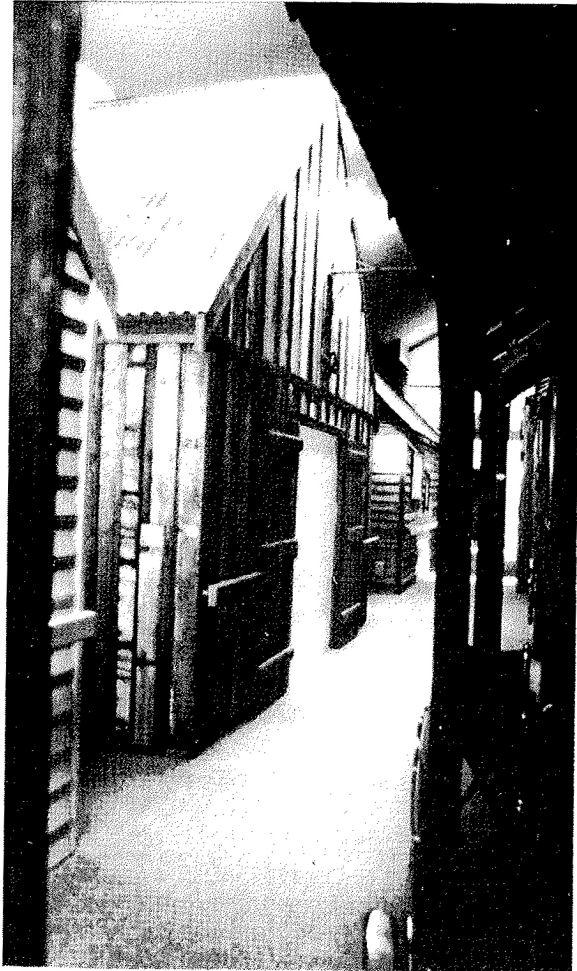


Fig.9, Robert Morris-Nunn, *Corumbene*, interior circulation space, 1997, New Norfolk, Tasmania, photograph: Richard Blythe

the interior is treated with a dignity normally associated with architectural elements of more noble purpose. This architectural order establishes the primacy of the shared histories of the occupants over both the institution and the architecture. These humble fragments, presented in such a way, illuminate and reinforce the magic realist notion of an underlying human nobility. In all three buildings the architectural normalcy of the exterior container establishes a believability which is carried over to, and which creates, a seamless transition with the imaginative interiors. These buildings achieve an enigmatic duplicity of both the magical and the real, of both understanding and ambiguity: and these are fundamental qualities evident in magic realist works.

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## Notes

- 1 In R. Spence, 'Magic realism', *Architectural Review*, April 1993, pp.38-40.
- 2 In F.L. Aldama, 'Structural configuration of magic realism in the works of Gabriel García Márquez, Leslie Marmon Silko, Charles Johnson and Julie Dash', *Journal of Narrative and Life History*, vol.5, no.2, 1995, p.148.
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- 4 Michel Foucault, 'Of other spaces: utopia and heterotopias', *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, London/New York: Routledge, 1997, p.352.
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- 16 L. Nochlin, *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1994, p.7.
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- 18 S. Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, London: Picador, (1981) 1983, p.238.
- 19 P. Merivale, 'Saleem fathered by Oskar: *Midnight's Children*, magic realism and the *Tin Drum*', *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, Durham/London: Duke University Press, (1995) 1997, p.341.
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- 21 S. Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, London: Harper Collins, 1995, p.6.
- 22 Morris-Nunn, 'Aged care design', p.1.
- 23 *ibid.*, p.6.