



The charm of the table
is to find yourself at it.

- Francis Ponge¹

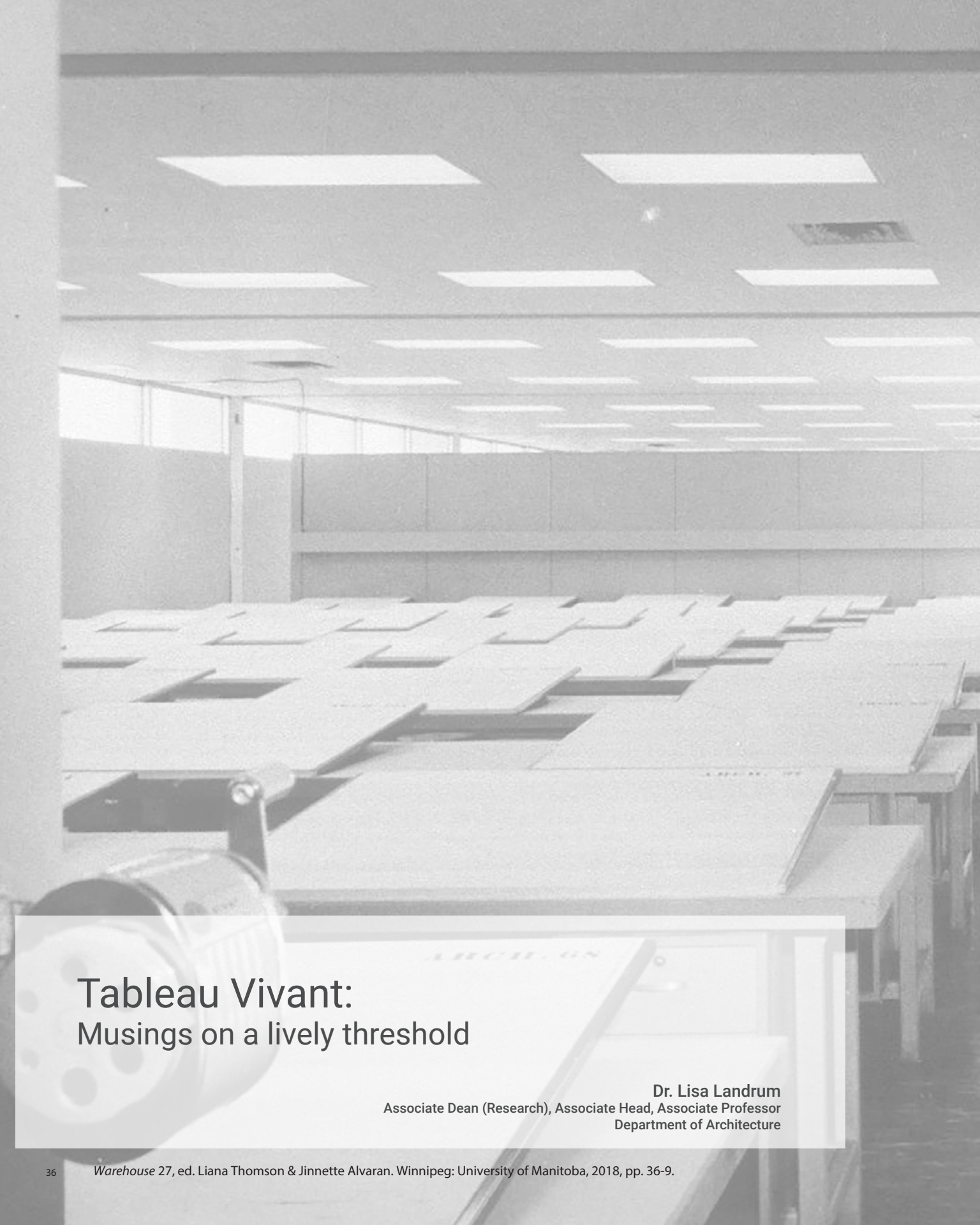


Tableau Vivant: Musings on a lively threshold

Dr. Lisa Landrum
Associate Dean (Research), Associate Head, Associate Professor
Department of Architecture

The more absorbed we become in our work, the more our worktable recedes from awareness. Yet, without its subtle support, resistance and receptivity, our work would be placeless, aimless and lifeless.

The worktable is a setting, a horizon and a threshold for individual concentration, collaborative exchange and transformative events. In an era of digital desktops, hand-held devices and hyper-linked routines, settling down to work at a physical table may seem an antiquated practice. But, its delimiting space and focused occasion are arguably all the more important amid today's limitless mobility and arbitrary distractions. What we confess of our iPhones, the poet Francis Ponge once confided to his humble writing table: "Table, you're crucial to me."

Worktables labored over by design students, year after year, are silent witnesses to a continuous life of learning and discovery. Their worn but stable surfaces receive and record efforts of heuristic making, drawing and thinking. These marks, drawings, doodles, scratches, scores and stains are tell-tale traces attesting to the pleasurable difficulties of design – to the literal and figurative hammering-out of work. These impressions chronicle the multitude of deliberate, tentative and serendipitous quests shared and accrued over decades. Individuals come and go; worktables linger, receiving, again and again, ever-changing yet repeatable creative processes. The table – "a memory placed at my elbow" – puts new students tacitly in touch with work of students past.

These tabletops are stages of striving. Their scarred surfaces dramatize events of concentration and diversion, deliberation and liberation, intention and mistake, reason and whimsy. Up close, these tabletops resemble the thickly-layered mixed-media canvases of Eva Hesse, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Robert Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly, Antoni Tàpies and Anselm Kiefer. While modern architects tended to white-wash their walls, these artists saturated their surfaces with substantive textures and a universe of gestures, enacting personal and political ambitions and struggles.

These weathered and wise surfaces are dynamic palimpsests: prior markings are not erased, but rather retained, sinking in as new impressions enter the mix. "Palimpsest" literally means "rubbed" or "scraped again", or "smoothed over." It originally referred to a kind of medieval manuscript. At a time when paper was scarce, it was common practice to write over a previous text on the same animal hide parchment, often by writing between the lines, or at 90-degrees to the original, or by partially scraping off a layer or superimposing a smoothing wash, before adding fresh textual and graphic content. Like an archaeological site, palimpsests retain and potentially reveal more than immediately meets the eye, enabling discoveries beneath the surface, inviting interpretation of events less past than ongoing.

Architectural drawings (like those of Carlo Scarpa) are described as palimpsestic when they reveal the layered workings and reworkings of a sustained design process, potently intermingling descriptive constructs with speculative constructions. Not only drawings, but buildings (like Sverre Fehn's Hamar Museum in Norway) and cities (like Rome), are inhabitable palimpsests with many layers of living history.

Like well-worn surfaces of a public plaza or shifting sands of a popular beach, the cosmos of impressions left behind on tabletops are signs of vigorous life. According to a story told by Vitruvius, when the

shipwrecked philosopher Aristippus stumbled across geometrical figures drawn in the sand on an unknown shore, he was reassured that his survival was a welcome arrival. For, he interpreted the markings as evidence of human reason and curiosity – auspicious signs of a living and open society. Had the beach been bare, he might have thought himself alone in a precariously barren situation.

Are the graffiti-like markings on studio tabletops similar signs of human vitality and creative intelligence? – Welcoming signs to incoming design students that they are not alone, but already part of a living tradition; that others before them have survived, contrived, and thrived?

Tabula Rasa?

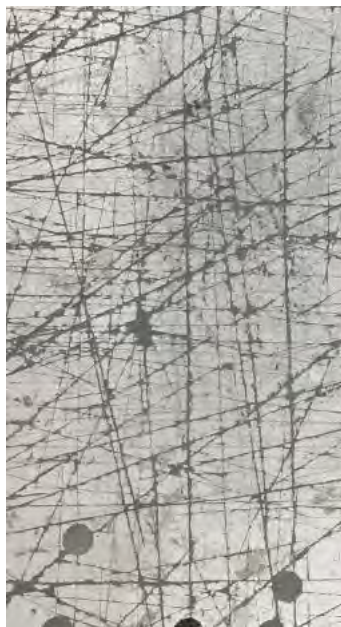
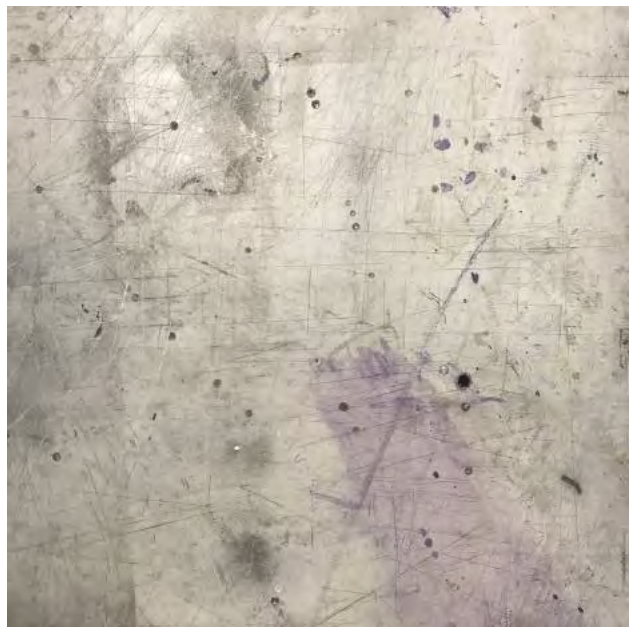
The original design for the Faculty of Architecture's student drafting tables appears on Construction Drawing #32, prepared by Smith Carter Katelnikoff Associates (now Architecture49) as part of the design for the new J.A. Russell Building in 1958. Like the Russell Building (and its Miesian precedents), the table design provides lessons in deceptive simplicity. The geometric clarity, durable materiality and relative neutrality of the 24-foot long student worktables are not simply formal exercises in monumental minimalism, but crucial correlates for the ever-changing yet repeatable rhythms of life.

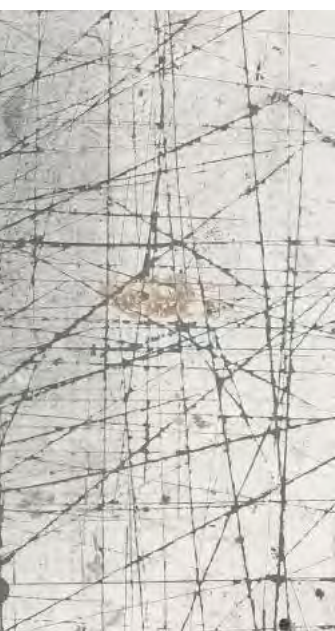
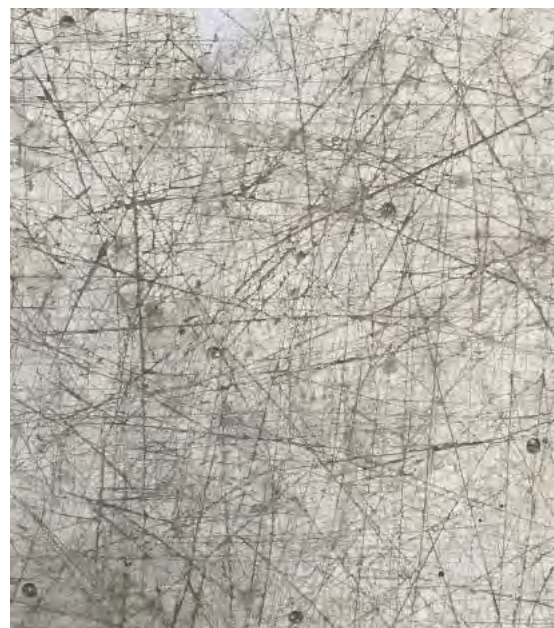
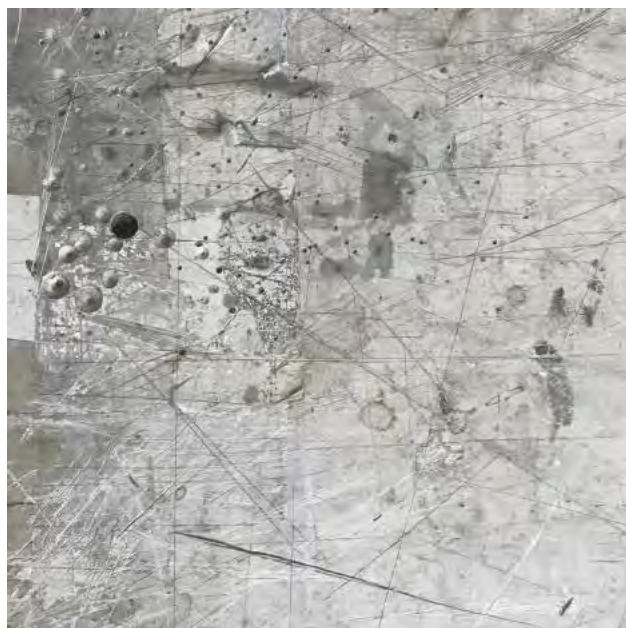
When the Faculty of Architecture expanded into the Architecture2 Building (sometime in the 1980's), some worktables migrated to the new studio space. In summer 2018, the 60-year-old worktables were removed from the third and fourth floor studios of the Architecture2 Building to make way for new furniture and a major interior refurbishment. This much-appreciated, long-overdue renovation, supported by a \$1.3-million University of Manitoba learning space renewal fund, will generally improve the work spaces for students and staff who call Arch2 home. While the whole environment will feel refreshed, the worktables – where students will again learn and play, mingle and make, doze and dream – will offer the most palpable encounter of disciplinary renewal.

These new tabletops will initially provide a tabula rasa, but their "clean slates" will soon again become tableaux vivants – lively scenes silently embodying momentous and edifying stories: "–ably remains the table. Rasa or not, however you wish, the table remains."

CITATIONS

Francis Ponge, *The Table* [La Table, 1991], trans. C. Zamponi (Cambridge, MA: Wakefield Press, 2017), p. 9, 33, 50, 76.





THE TABLE remains

