

# HABITAT

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Callum Morton, *Habitat* (installation view), 2003. Image courtesy of Helen Oliver-Skuse.



From top:  
Damien Salmon assisting the  
artist in his studio, 2003;  
*Habitat* in construction, 2003;  
Actors recording the  
*Habitat* soundtrack, 2003.  
Images courtesy of the artist.





Callum Morton, *Habitat* (installation views), 2003. Images courtesy of Helen Oliver-Skuse and Richard Crompton.

### Groundhog Day

For the past decade Callum Morton has been building architectural models and fragments that set familiar forms from architectural history against their original, ideal purpose. The ideal, 'designed' form in each case is presented in an ordinary, or debased application. So it is with the Farnsworth House, designed by Mies Van Der Rohe in 1945. It appears in Morton's work on several occasions, not as a well-preserved icon of Modernist design, but with the addition of sound and lights, as the incidental site of suburban drama and mayhem. In one work, a wild party rages within, which gets out of control and ends with gunshots and screams, possibly a murder. In another work, the House is duplicated and arranged to form a compound or court, wherein we can see and hear the occupants watching TV (a horror movie), throwing a party, getting burgled, or just doing nothing. In these works, form certainly doesn't follow function, as Mies said it should. But architecture does, nonetheless, become a stage or proscenium for various events set against and within it.

In other works by Morton, Philip Johnson's *Glass House* from the 1950s is recast as an abandoned petrol station in the middle of nowhere, and Libera's Casa Maloparte, built on a dramatic promontory of rock jutting into the sea, emits a single phrase enunciated robotically over and over *ad absurdum*: 'Silencio'. Morton has also chosen some curios from the Modernist canon, like the holiday cabin where Le Corbusier died of a heart attack, wherein we see and hear the grand master flatline, or Melbourne's own Gas and Fuel building, which was destroyed to make way for the new, much vaunted Federation Square.

In this endeavour, Morton appears to be an anti-Modernist, ultimately critical of the Utopian ideals that these buildings embody, undermining their seriousness with dramatic and often humorous narratives drawn from life, films, books or his own experience. The ideal world composed by architects is filled with grisly ends and grimy details: death, S&M, conflict, loss, annulment. Thus he renders an alternative, corrupted architectural history, and the pristine, empty, quasi-sacred spaces of the world's renowned buildings are filled to bursting with all sorts of contrary and profane events.

Certainly, these odd combinations manifest an awkward fit between art and life, high and low culture, history and the present. And they suggest an underside to the annals of architecture, perhaps even an historical unconscious; the return of what has been repressed in any merely formal account of developments. Indeed, it's in this grey area, between the obvious references in Morton's work, that a more complex picture of how and where we live in the world renders itself in flux.



*Habitat*, the case in point, is a 1 : 50 architectural scale model of a mass housing project that was built in 1967 for Expo in Montreal, Canada, by the Israeli architect Moshe Safdie (incidentally, Morton's father also worked on the project as an architect). *Habitat* consisted of 354 modular construction units making up 158 houses. In all, there are 16 different housing types within the project.

*Habitat* today is an exclusive 'designer' apartment complex, but it was first proposed as a utopian housing project, suffused with the communitarian ethics of the late 1960s. It developed out of Safdie's 1961 MA thesis at McGill University and his interest in the radical redesign of the urban environment in line with the complexity of lived reality. In *Habitat*, the unitary structures could be varied systematically to account for different people's lives, and mass housing was therefore individualised to accommodate a range of lifestyles and user types, with larger 'family' apartments set alongside single units.

Morton's model comprises 310 different mass-produced units, affixed according to Safdie's original plans, to represent 116 of the apartments. Some of these contain lights and sounds, programmed to suggest an imaginary day in the life of the complex, and a day in the lives of the many people who might live in such a building. For example, as the sun rises, waves of life break across the façade. We hear alarm clocks, morning ablutions, telephones ringing. We see lights coming on, hear conversations ensuing, people laughing, people yelling. Some fights break out. People leave for work. The day wears on. Someone plays loud music. People shout, dogs bark, babies cry. As evening grows, people come home, lights dim and television sets begin to flicker. Finally, reparations are made, and calm returns to the building. So a day passes in a cycle of about twenty-eight minutes (that is 1/50th day). But this same day passes repeatedly, infinitely.

The denizens of Morton's model are locked within this diminutive scale and accelerated time frame, bound to do the same things day in, day out, caught in a cycle of unending domestic conflict, set against a distant 1960s dream of community living. They are characters unable to reach escape velocity from the orbital pull of their daily routine and entrenched cynicism, despite the best intentions of architects. However, as the drama unfolds, resolves and repeats, we also sense new dreams arising from the disagreements, a profound relenting to life's true grit. And Morton finds this small, indefatigable hope between the architect's schemata for social transformation and the plebeian routines of the species; precisely, between the dream of architecture and reality of life on earth. He figures the shape or form of this hope as a double helix, or moebius, as it springs eternal but is bound to fail, looping back to where it starts, the reason we go on day after day: not so much a form of progress, as a tempo or pulse keyed to celestial movements.

And so in the model, the cycle of light and sound, day and night, the concert of lives, the refrain of sorrow, anger, grief and exhaustion, is reiterated across the honeycomb facade like a grand symphonic chorale, that rises and falls according to some perpetual, inbuilt species' rhythm. And in this whorl of living the building comes alive, like a hive.

Stuart Koop, Co-curator, *Habitat*

## Biography

Fake brick walls, shop awnings, balconies and suburban garage doors have all featured in Morton's artwork. Through his practice he reveals the apparent, making us look again at features of our built environment that have become invisible simply through their prevalence. In recent years the physical elements of the work have been accompanied by sound and lights, which contribute to the ambience of an installation. These noises mimic those of raucous parties, domestic discord, scenes from horror and science fiction films, all of which have influenced the artist. Morton presents for the contemplation of the viewer both the wry and the humorous, unique juxtapositions of high and low, references to both the extraordinary and the mundane.

Morton studied architecture at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology from 1983 to 1985. He then completed a Bachelor of Fine Art (Painting) at Victoria College in 1988, returning to RMIT for a Masters in Fine Art in 1999. Since 1995, he has tutored in painting, sculpture and photography in Australia and the United States of America. Morton held his first solo exhibition in 1989 and since that time he has participated in numerous group and solo exhibitions in Australia and overseas. Morton's significant contribution to Australian artistic practice has been acknowledged through the awarding of a retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney in October 2003.

Anonda Bell

## Callum Morton

### *Habitat*

2002-2003

laser cut MDF, perspex,  
synthetic polymer paint, lights, sound  
Collection of Corbett Lyon and Yueji Lyon

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to: Robin Batty (Boolean Engineering), Brian and Erin (Brian Laurence Sound), Phil (Heron Technology), Andy and Ben (Bluebottle), Roslyn Oxley, Anna Schwartz, Ian and Rhana Morton, Bev and Russell 'The Rip' Hellier, Janenne Eaton, Nick Taylor, Nick Ruljancich, Jeff Binder, Andrew S. Gilbert, Marco Ciappi, Tammy McCarthy, Dean Boothroyd and Vivian Mitsoggiani (Matstudio), Nick Hubicki, Mark Raggatt, Tim Wid, all the crew at Lambeth Street and Anonda Bell, Anat Meiri, Dee Dzelalija, Jason Smith, Julie Singleton, Robin Marshall, Cameron Midson and Toby Pola (all at the NGV).

Special thanks to: Chris Reddaway, Stuart Koop, Corbett and Yueji Lyon, Damien Salmon, Richard Giblett, Peter Uhd, Trudy Hellier and Polly Hellier-Morton.

Callum Morton is represented by:  
Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney.  
Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne.  
Karyn Lovegrove Gallery, Los Angeles.  
Gimpel Fils, London.

This exhibition has been co-curated by Stuart Koop and Anonda Bell. The production of this work was made possible by the generous assistance of Corbett Lyon and Yueji Lyon.

Editing: Ev Beissbarth  
Catalogue Design: Cameron Midson  
Exhibition Design: Dee Dzelalija  
Cover Photography: Helen Oliver-Skuse  
Word processing: Judy Shelverton  
CTP and printing: Energi Print

Exhibition dates: 31 May – 17 August 2003

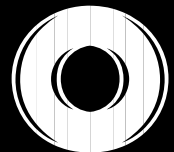
Cover: Callum Morton, *Habitat* (installation view), 2003.

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The artist installing *Habitat* at NGV Australia, 2003.  
Image courtesy of Christian Markel.

The Contemporary Projects Gallery is  
generously supported by Macquarie Bank



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The production of this work was made  
possible by a grant from Arts Victoria

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