

LEITH MACFARLANE, WITH ANDREW DOUGLAS

---

## To the Lighthouse

INTERSTICES 24

Fig. 1 Leith Macfarlane (2023).  
The lighthouse in a quilted form.  
[Photograph: Daniel Ho]



*To the Lighthouse* is a title borrowing from Virginia Woolf's 1927 novel of the same name. The latter tells the story of a summer retreat for the Ramsay family to Scotland's Isle of Skye—a remote place visited over a decade in the early twentieth century that witnesses a mix of joys and tragedies for the family. The lighthouse in Woolf's novel is a kind of ever-present draw that the family keeps putting off visiting, but which represents an object of shared desire and potential fulfilment.

Lighthouses, of course, are utilitarian yet dreamy architectures, standing on coastal edges radiating caution to nighttime mariners, but also suggesting a certain solace, signalling that land is here awaiting return and the completion of journeys. These complex associations fittingly organise the difficult topic of investigation undertaken in this research—family violence.

Aotearoa New Zealand has one of the highest rates of family violence in the developed world. It is an intergenerational issue that cuts across socio-economic differences, affecting people of all genders, ethnicities, ages, and sexualities.<sup>1</sup> Both a taboo topic and a complex and difficult issue to address, no part of life in Aotearoa is untouched by the pain caused by family violence, with the architectural profession in no way being excluded from its implications and effects.

Instead of reimagining current architectures associated with family violence, like police stations, courts, refuge and transition housing, this research looks beyond what already exists and considers the possibility of new typologies and ideas for facilitating foundational changes to patterns of family violence. Looking beyond individual homes, the research speculatively considered alternative ways through which architecture might foster social sustainability and care. The proposition was that improving this may substantively shift the context in which violence occurs.

Fig 2. Leith Macfarlane (2023). Parting the quilts at the end-of-year critique, revealing the speculative street and suburban lighthouses, with a table of artefacts and counter-artefacts in the foreground. [Photograph: Daniel Ho]



This creative research complemented an earlier body of legal research that investigated the role of family violence courts in Aotearoa. Now, in a different disciplinary context, the question became how to address the runaway violence unfolding in our homes directly. Revisiting the topic twenty years later in an academic, yet creative, field offered both a new perspective and a new opportunity to further reconsider the place family violence holds within our social and cultural fabric.

It is important to acknowledge that dealing with a complex issue like family violence is fraught with difficulty. Being part of an academic institution gave me the ability to examine such violence at a distance. That said, the project had a profound impact on me, and in many ways, my emotional experiences and responses to the design research directed the work. In encountering this work, I hoped it would be understood as both a protest signaling the urgency of an affirmative architectural response and a wish to speculate on a world beyond family violence.

### The making of dark machines

The pervasiveness of family violence in Aotearoa is such that it exists all around but often in silence, with the New Zealand media referring to it as our “dirty little secret,”<sup>2</sup> a “hidden pandemic,”<sup>3</sup> and “the taboo topic.”<sup>4</sup> The initial positioning of the design research was therefore to make visible and reveal this open secret. My way of grasping the severity and life-altering consequences of intimate violence involved the production of a series of abstract artefacts or machines that sought, in some way, to express what is often inexpressible—the painfulness of persistent violence at home. This making, in turn, offered some agency in the face of what appeared at the time to be an insurmountable challenge facing the research—finding an architectural vocabulary capable of credibly working with others’ pain.

Fig. 3 Leith Macfarlane (2023). Photographs of the artefacts. Clockwise from top left: *The Void*, *The Watchtower*, *In the Bellows*, and *Pirouette Silhouette*, along with an example of the narratives underpinning each artefact. [Photographs: Christopher Young]



Fig. 4 Leith Macfarlane (2023). Photographs of the counter-artefacts. Clockwise from top: *Scrap Yard*, *Under Renovation*, *In Tension*, and *The House that Burnt Up*, along with an example of the narratives underpinning each counter-artefact. [Photographs: Christopher Young]



This approach is derived from aspects of Elaine Scarry's landmark text, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985). For Scarry, the inexpressible, world-destroying dynamic inherent in pain can be expressed by another through the creation of material artefacts.<sup>5</sup> Scarry suggests that the act of creating artefacts in response to another's pain is an act of empathy, a powerful expression of compassion, and an attempt to feel another's pain and wish it away.<sup>6</sup> The artefacts can therefore be described as empathetic bridges that aim to reach towards hurt, on the basis that sharing calls forth awareness and, ideally, ultimately, healing.

The conceptual artefacts sought to approximate survivors' accounts of experiencing and getting free of violence.<sup>7</sup> Four dark machines narrate violence: *The Void*, *The Watchtower*, *In the Bellows*, and *The Pirouette Silhouette* (Fig. 3). Arrayed

against these, four counter-artefacts revolve around ideas of hope and resilience: *Scrap Yard*, *Under Renovation*, *In Tension*, and *The House that Burnt Up* (Fig. 4).

Drawing from architect, teacher, and architectural theorist John Hejduk and his work *Victims* (1985) and *House of the Suicide and House of the Mother of the Suicide* (1980–82), the artefacts similarly aim to foreground fraught, complex relationships through narrative means. The commonality shared by these artefacts is that they speak to each other of difficulty but also of the potential joy of an emotional and material reshaping of that difficulty. At the immediate level of their specific assembly and crafting, the artefacts all involved some form of collaboration—a way, perhaps, to subconsciously share the burden of the research with others.

Rather than isolated machines, the artefacts are depicted relationally and are gathered together on a black tabletop called *Suburban St*, where the outlines of house plans are shown in white chalk (Fig. 5). The result is a streetscape housing the artefacts and counter-artefacts that reveals the complex reality that surrounds our everyday lives. Reference here is to Lars von Trier's *Dogville* (2003), a film similarly telling the story of family and community violence, that was shot within a table-like, empty sound stage. Adopting the confronting nature of *Dogville*, the curation and scale of the artefacts and counter-artefacts intentionally confront viewers with the intention of drawing them towards a sense of collective responsibility, but also empathy.

Fig. 5 Leith Macfarlane (2023). The streetscape shows the artefacts and counter-artefacts housed as a collective. The artefacts are shown contained within the house outlines with counter-artefacts breaking free from the house boundaries. [Photograph: Leith Macfarlane]



### Luminous ground

The introduction of counter-artefacts pushed the design research towards a more optimistic and hopeful direction, shifting the focus, which had until then been heavy and dark. From this, the work redirected towards countering the initial exploration of the pain of family violence with radical softness, vulnerability, and care. Reference here was drawn from a collection of essays titled *Radical Softness*



Fig. 6 Leith Macfarlane (2023). The final pair of quilts. The first quilt (left) and its yellow square represent a welcoming light in a window and suggest a deconstructed lighthouse in a stormy seascape. The second quilt built on the first and suggests a brighter landscape. [Digitally edited photograph: Leith Macfarlane]

as a *Boundless Form of Resistance* (2015),<sup>8</sup> which, amongst other things, emphasised the power of care and vulnerability as acts of protest, subversion, and resistance.

Initially, this focused on the craft and political agency of quilt-making, that everyday, mostly female, art that, in certain circumstances, has given voice to a radical societal accounting—the 1987 AIDS Memorial Quilt project being a well-known example of this. Quilts embody a labour of care, enacting loving cover both literally and figuratively. Homes bestow these qualities too, or can, and emphasising how care could be amplified suggested how violence might be eclipsed and curtailed.

Pursuing this insight, two final artefacts were produced—a pair of quilts, each carefully stitched together from the remnants of old family clothes. Unlike traditional quilts, they were intentionally left without a backing, leaving the stitching exposed. This exposure aimed to reproduce how a home subject to family violence presents to the world—the front of the quilts being clean and tidy, while the underside remains messy and thread ridden. In making the first quilt, I included an off-centred square of yellow, and on reflection, it suggested a deconstructed lighthouse within a dark blue seascape (Fig. 6). The second quilt, built upon the first, suggested a brighter landscape—one filled with more lighthouses perhaps.

Across the various stages of artefact-making, there was a building tension seeking to move beyond the representation of family violence towards more concrete architectural interventions able to suggest social restoration. The last of the artefacts—the quilts—bridged this gap, laying the foundation for an architectural response drawing more fully on the idea and actuality of lighthouses. Their dual nature, signalling caution and relief, prompted the question of what a corresponding architecture might become.

In conceiving of such lighthouses, I wondered how they might be situated. In finding a home and ground for them, I looked to streets and ways in which houses

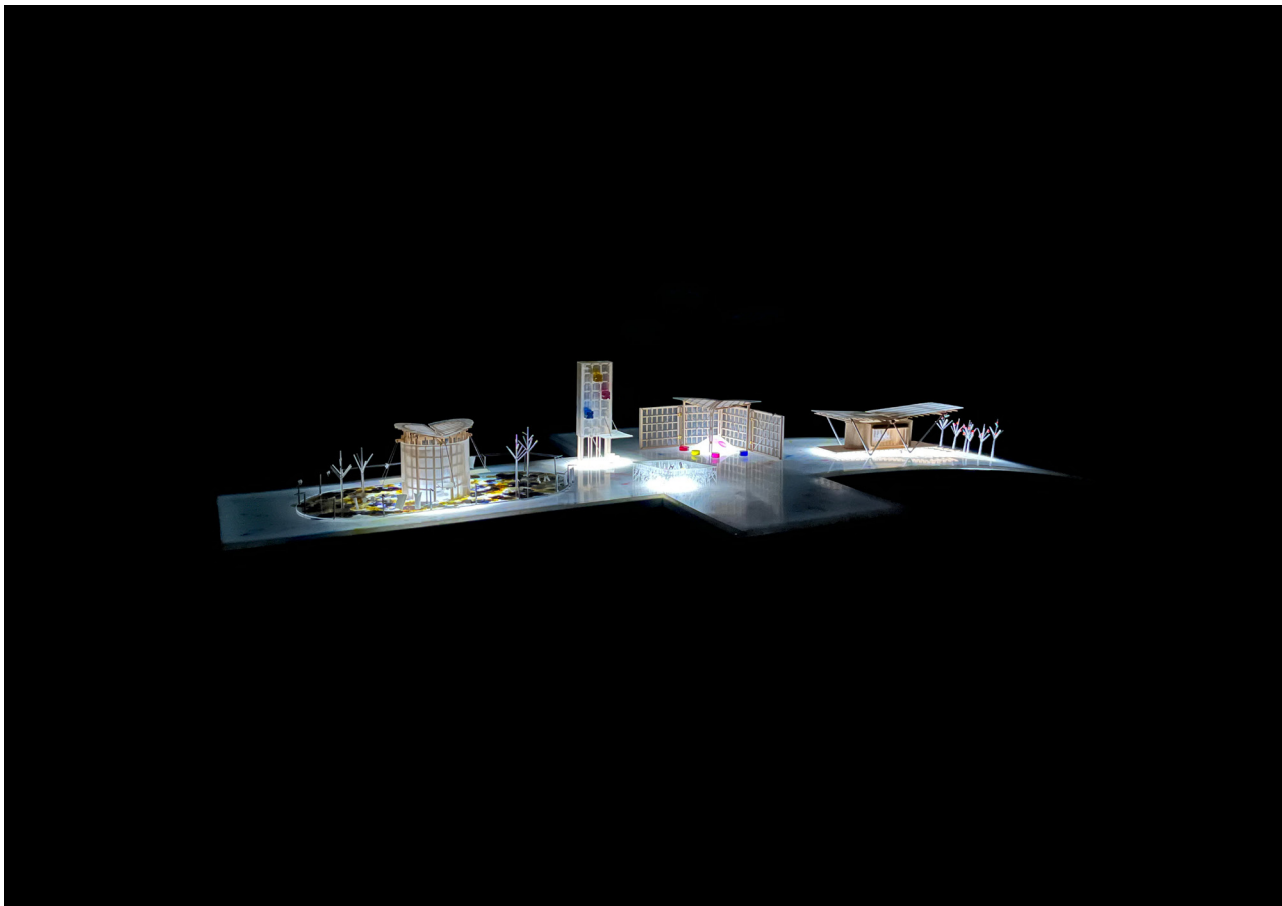


Fig. 7 Leith Macfarlane (2023). Final speculative street with the four illuminated speculative lighthouses. The speculative street is made of recycled plastic milk bottles on a welded steel frame. [Digitally edited photograph: Leith Macfarlane]

turned outward might become responsive to collective care (rather than closing in around a “nuclear family”). Streets aren’t just places of vehicular transit; they have long been sites of protest and societal reckoning. With the future of cars uncertain, what if all that in-between tarmac became shared spaces held in trust by neighbourhoods? And what if houses surrendered their autonomy and decanted part of their routines into shared spaces that were social, cooperative, and even joyful?

### Home becoming

With this step towards speculative architectural interventions, the work shifted from representation to restoration. Charting a journey from worlds of loss to world-making, knowing that the latter won’t necessarily “fix” the former, but that it might make loss and hurt unsustainable. Restoration took the form of speculative lighthouses, intended to dot our suburban streets and restore a sense of collective care in our communities (Fig. 7). Like traditional quilts and lighthouses, the intention was for these architectural interventions to embody both a soft protest and a sense of supporting comfort.

Drawing reference from both the Women’s Police Stations of Argentina<sup>9</sup> and Maggie’s Cancer Caring Centres,<sup>10</sup> these lighthouses were to be community-based, prevention-oriented, bright and welcoming, small and iconic, functionally enabling, yet symbolically uplifting. Instances of everyday care and beauty, both argued to be counters to pain, were adopted to guide the use and form of the speculative architectures. Supporting this notion that everyday care carries much



Fig. 8 Leith Macfarlane (2023). Illuminated lighthouses on the speculative street. In the centre, *The Playroom* (and inverted hill sitting across the street intersection); to the right, *The Caretaker's Cottage*. [Photograph: Daniel Ho]

potency was found in Robert Davis's "Practice of the Everyday in the Literature of Nursing" (2005), which explores how nurses, responding to the world-reducing aspect of pain, practice everyday acts of care.<sup>11</sup> And I called on the issue of beauty as a just quality to be shared widely through Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999).<sup>12</sup>

What resulted was the design and making of four speculative lighthouses that revolved around four everyday acts of care: washing, watching, playing, and resting. All were formed with Scarry's five tenets of beauty in mind: symmetry, colour, clarity, vivacity, and unity.<sup>13</sup> These lighthouses either blocked, bridged, sat beside, or between the street (Fig. 8). The models for these structures, each meticulously handcrafted like the quilts, serve as embodiments of care. A "laundry" and garden for drying washing (Fig. 9); a "bus stop" with street table and chairs beneath a tower for climbing and collecting games and books, all the better for waiting than getting someplace else (Fig. 9); an outward-opening "play room" for kids or adults, one that messes up and slows down the intersection (Fig. 10); and lastly, a "caretaker's cottage" of sorts, along with a citrus grove, both for retreat and sustenance of neighbours (Fig. 10). Like the earlier artefacts, these speculative lighthouses were embodied in detailed and redolent narratives.

The proposed speculative architectures, while conceptual, are entirely feasible and designed to be built by communities from common building materials. The ability for communities to place their lighthouses on the street sought to draw out family violence from the confined walls of the home onto the street and into a place of publicness and unavoidable visibility (Fig. 11), engendering a sense of collective accountability and responsibility.

Nevertheless, the Edenic crafting of care shown here won't look the same in every city neighbourhood. Streets will "collectivise" according to their own acts of care. The "street" shown in this project is a fiction, a compilation of remembered streets I have lived in across the years. And the lighthouses installed on it bear acts of everyday care important to me. I don't imagine the specificity it



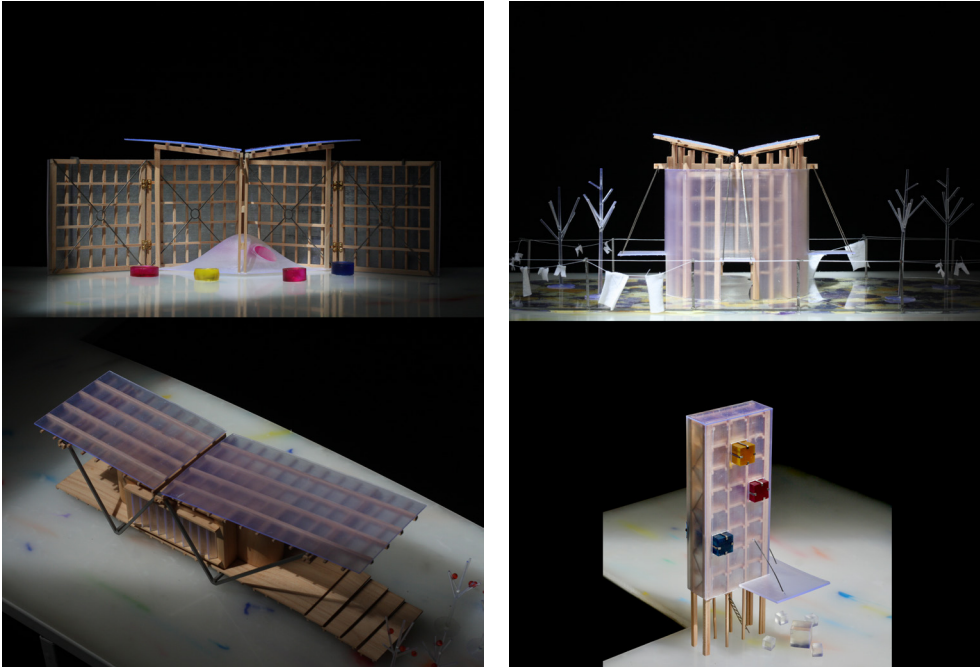


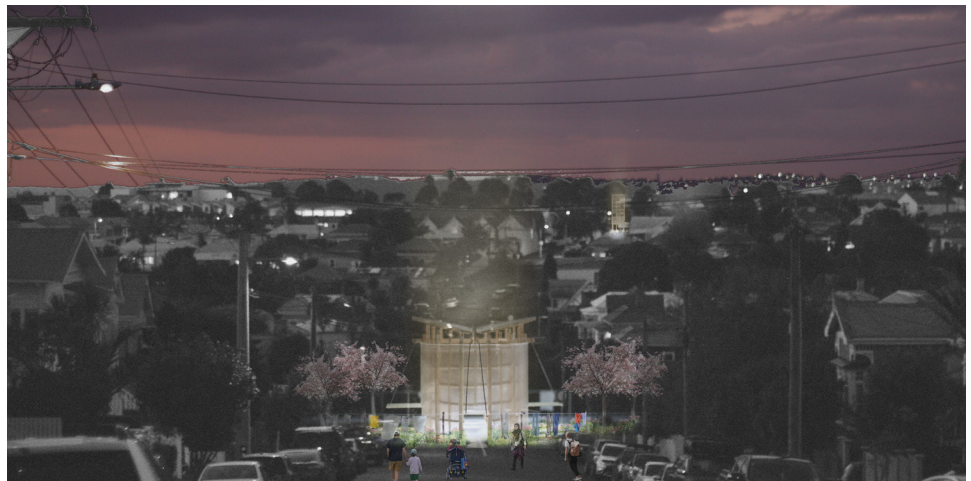
Fig. 9 Leith Macfarlane (2023). *The Laundry* and *The Bus Stop*, made from a combination of hand-cut cypress, 3D-printed resin, water jet-cut steel and cast coloured resin. [Photographs: Leith Macfarlane]

Fig. 10 Leith Macfarlane (2023). *The Playroom* and *The Caretaker's Cottage*, made from a combination of hand-cut cypress, 3D-printed resin, water jet-cut steel and cast coloured resin. [Photographs: Leith Macfarlane]

Fig. 11 Leith Macfarlane (2023). Example of *The Laundry* as a beacon on an imagined suburban street. [Digital collage: Leith Macfarlane]

describes will be reproduced everywhere. It is a lighthouse like that of Virginia Woolf, a beacon that warns of the troubled ground we hold, but also the joy of a home becoming invested with care.

My aim has been to engender critical discourse and give visibility to the issue of family violence. It has also been to imagine troubling circumstances differently. In this, I argue that architecture has a role to play in navigating these difficult issues and spaces within society.



## NOTES

1. United Nations Women, *Progress of the World's Women: In Pursuit of Justice* (United Nations Women, 2011), 134; "United Nations Report on Status of Women Released," New Zealand Family Violence Clearinghouse, 28 July 2011; "NZ worse for domestic violence—UN report," *Stuff*, 24 July 2011, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/5332717/NZ-worst-for-domestic-violence-UN-report>; The Joint Venture of the Social Wellbeing Board, *Prevention of Family and Sexual Violence: Briefing to the Incoming Minister, 3 November 2020* (Joint Venture, 2020), 8–9.
2. Leighton Keith, "Increasing family violence cases are New Zealand's 'dirty little secret,' police say," *Stuff*, 11 August 2016, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/83058580/increasing-family-violence-cases-are-new-zealands-dirty-little-secret-police-say>.
3. Radio New Zealand, "Family violence in NZ a 'hidden pandemic'—agencies," 26 November 2021, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/456549/family-violence-in-nz-a-hidden-pandemic-agencies>.
4. Helen Twose, "Facing violence, the taboo topic," *New Zealand Herald*, 26 August 2016.
5. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford University Press, 1985), 6.
6. Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 289–290.
7. I found valuable the personal accounts offered in the sixteen-part New Zealand documentary series *Breaking Silence* (Naashon Zalk, dir., 2020 and 2021; *Stuff*, accessed 25 March 2023, <https://interactives.stuff.co.nz/2020/06/breaking-silence/?cid=youtube>); the book *Double-Edged Sword* by New Zealand family violence survivor and advocate Simonne Butler (Simonne Butler and Andra Jenkin, *Double-Edged Sword: The Simonne Butler Story* (Mary Egan Publishing, 2016)); and the research and interviews of survivors undertaken by Australian investigative journalist Jess Hill in *See What You Made Me Do: Power, Control and Abuse* (Blank Inc, 2019), 111–112.
8. Be Oakley, "Radical Softness as a Boundless Form of Resistance," in *Radical Softness as a Boundless Form of Resistance* (GenderFail, 2020), 7.
9. Kerry Carrington, Maximo Sozzo, Vanessa Ryan, and Jess Rodgers, "How Women's Police Stations Empower Women, Widen Access to Justice and Prevent Gender Violence," *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* 9, no. 1 (2020): 48.
10. Charles Jenks, *The Architecture of Hope. Maggie's Cancer Caring Centres* (Frances Lincoln Limited, 2015), 7.
11. Robert Davis, "Practice of the Everyday in the Literature of Nursing," *The Journal of Medical Humanities* 26, no. 1 (2005), 8–9.
12. Elizabeth Smith, "The Body in Pain: An Interview with Elaine Scarry," *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 32, no. 2 (2006): 234.
13. Cambridge University, *Elaine Scarry: Beauty and Social Justice*. Posted 22 June 2010, by Cambridge University, YouTube, 55:49, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GhIOWhlxSEw>.