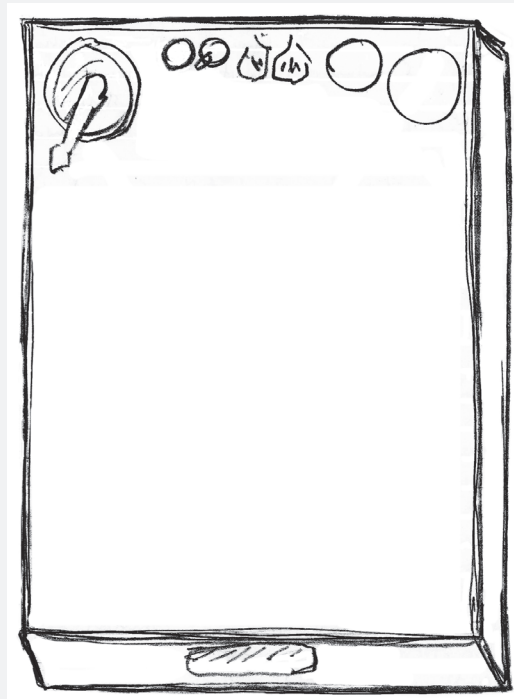
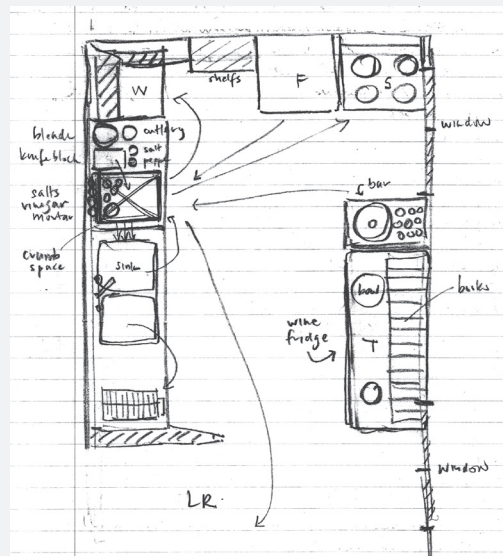


THE CHOPPING BLOCK

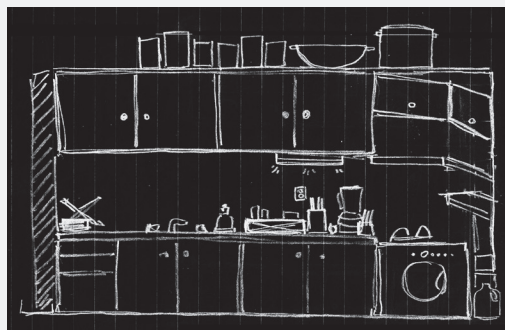
Centrally located, sometimes built in, chopping blocks have been a feature of Szanto-family kitchens for decades. They serve as cutting surfaces, preparing and/or staging areas for food and drink, and a gathering point for family members for stand-up eating or small meals. The current subject of examination is the Chopping Block (CB) located in David Szanto's kitchen overlooking boulevard St-Laurent, between rue Marie-Anne and avenue Mont-Royal in Montreal, Quebec.



The CB rests on a wood-grain melamine countertop adjacent to the kitchen sink. On the opposite side sit the knife block, an electric blender, and cutlery in a repurposed tomato tin. The CB also serves as a platform for a mortar and pestle, salt pots, a sugar container, and on most occasions, a partial bulb of garlic and partial lemons and limes in various states of dessication.



The CB, perhaps the least visually significant entity in the kitchen, is nonetheless a powerful actant, both in its domination of the space and of David's movements and activity, as well as in its own inherent thingness.



acacia wood

395 x 460 x 63 mm

nine edge-grain planks, glued and reinforced with three cross-bore dowels

inset handles on either end

purchased:
Burbank, CA
2003

retailer:
IKEA

ID:
161.807.06

manufactured:
Thailand

current location:
Montreal, QC

previous locations:
Portland, ME
Los Angeles, CA

THE CHOPPING BLOCK IS

heavy... unwieldy...

...and therefore doesn't move much when I'm chopping on it—it connects me and my veg solidly to the counter, to the floor, to the building, to the bedrock, to the earth. ...and therefore I don't move it but move myself around it, bring things to it, wipe it off into the sink, my hand, the counter, the floor.

flat... smooth...

...and therefore it is a platform for other things, not just those I cut or spread; it raises the height of my surface; it counters the annoying lack of kickspace below the cabinets. ...and therefore passively lets liquids flow off of it and onto the counter or floor, or under its own self to create breeding grounds for slime and bacteria and bread-crumbs paste.

wood... thick...

...and therefore holds smells and tastes and sometimes puts them back onto the things I am cutting or preparing, or reminds me of what I have cut or prepared recently. ...and therefore digests microbes and molds and allows me to wash it well but not obsessively, but also makes me protect it from raw chicken and pork (with an acrylic board that I think I can clean more thoroughly...)

central...

...and therefore I have surrounded it with other things like seasonings and knives and light and electricity and my own activities. ...and therefore makes me place things on it and use it as a staging area, and makes me use it every day and care for it and wipe it down so I don't transfer too much from one food to another.

old(ish)...

...and therefore I treasure it because it came with me instead of staying with Steve when we broke up, and I have it because I was the real cook and the one it mattered to, and so it is my stage not his, and reinforces my identity and sense of self and community and survival.

going to be hard to place in Jean's apartment, if/when...

...and therefore reminds me every day of the need to problem solve, but also makes me anxious.

THE CHOPPING BLOCK LOUNGE

INTRODUCTION

Initial examination of the Chopping Block and its material and non-material qualities shows that the CB indeed displays aspects of Jane Bennett's notion of *thing power*. Apart from the wood and glue that compose it, which have a vibrancy of their own, the CB's other physical qualities, and the existence it has led to date, imbue it with an actancy in the day-to-day life of the kitchen, as well as within the mental and emotional life of the humans around it.

Due to its heft and substance, the CB remains more or less in one place. By its placement and surface area (and the quality of its surface), it acquires a centrality in the kitchen's functions. From this spatial centrality, and its historically central positioning in previous locations (both geographically and figuratively), it has taken on a dominant status in the emotional life of its owner (DAS). While this dominion is partially projected onto it—an objectification—it is also partially self-acquired and exerted. It is this dynamic of domination/submission, between the CB and DAS (and other humans), that has been the subject of this design exploration. The thingness of the CB, and the thing versus object status of other entities in the human-and-food realm, is the larger question that encompasses this project.

THE ASSUMPTION

In social relationships, the notion of *alpha* is often used to refer to a dominant individual who leads or controls an interaction. In the socio-sexual, male-female context, the man is portrayed as the dominant partner in the majority of situations, given his more normative penetrative role and the cultural attributes associated with it. Between same-sex couples, the terms *top* and *bottom* are used, particularly among gay men, although the words are by no means exclusive either to men or to homosexuality. However, because sexual differences are absent in same-sex couples, the dominance associated with penetration has frequently been called into question, both in academic realms as well as the less formal context of the bedroom. Provided the sexual activity is consensual, the bottom is frequently seen to have great power in the dynamic—both to refuse and to provide engagement with the top. This reality is reflected in the expression *power bottom*, which despite various interpretations nonetheless acknowledges the power of an apparently submissive partner.

Between the CB and DAS, a similar dynamic exists, though clearly without any aspect of sexuality. The CB is submissive both to DAS—moved, manipulated, employed—as well as to the environment and things around it. Knives and other implements cut it and sit upon it; food and drink and containers rest on it and leave their residues behind; chemical and electromagnetic agents, including air, water, soap, light, and sound, act upon it. As described above, however, the CB also dominates DAS and the kitchen environment. It compels movement around itself, it weighs massively on the counter and supporting architecture of the apartment, it demands cleaning and occasional movement for extended maintenance. It is both top and bottom to DAS's bottom and top.

During the first weeks of this design project, the CB was viewed solely as dominant in its interactions with DAS in the kitchen. The assumption, then, was that the room designed for it should allow the CB to be submissive, or at least to shed the requirement to dominate that has been placed on it. The room would be a kind of lounge or dressing room, where the CB could be



Figs. A, B: anthropomorphized Chopping Block in leisure settings



private and reflective. It was imagined that this space would allow the CB to cry, or to mourn, or to muse on the inequities between humans and the various elements of the food realm, including food. The notions of leisure and relaxation, self-care and beautification were explored, along with a study of the CB in various anthropomorphized settings. (Figs. A, B)

Further exploration, however, underscored that the framing of the CB solely as dominant of DAS does no more to honor the CB's thing power than placing it in a smoking jacket with a martini and crossword puzzle. Although its power to dominate is an extension of the CB's materiality and centrality, the projection of the CB as "top" is as much a disempowerment of it as DAS's objectification of it as a kitchen tool.

The revised assumption, therefore, is that as a thing with its own inherent power, the CB requires a space of its own in which it can enact its own thingness, removed from the dominant/submissive role required of it in interaction with DAS. Despite a lack of knowledge of what such a thing might call such a space, for the purposes of this exploration, it will be called a Lounge.

THE PROGRAM

The Chopping Block Lounge is a place for the CB to self-empower, to self-cleanse, to feel its own materiality (or escape from it), to eschew its objectized responsibilities imposed by its relationship to DAS, and to be itself, *whatever that is*. It is a recovery place, a private place, a place in which the diurnal cycle has no meaning and in which the impositions on the CB, because of that cycle, are absent. It is a place to submit to itself as a thing, to be inside its own room, rather than outside, in the food system, where it is other to humans. Within the social and physical environment of DAS (and other humans), food, and the CB's kitchen neighbours, the Lounge is a black box: our not knowing what takes place inside enables the CB to be a thing.

THE CHOPPING BLOCK'S ECOLOGIES

ENVIRONMENTAL/ SOCIAL

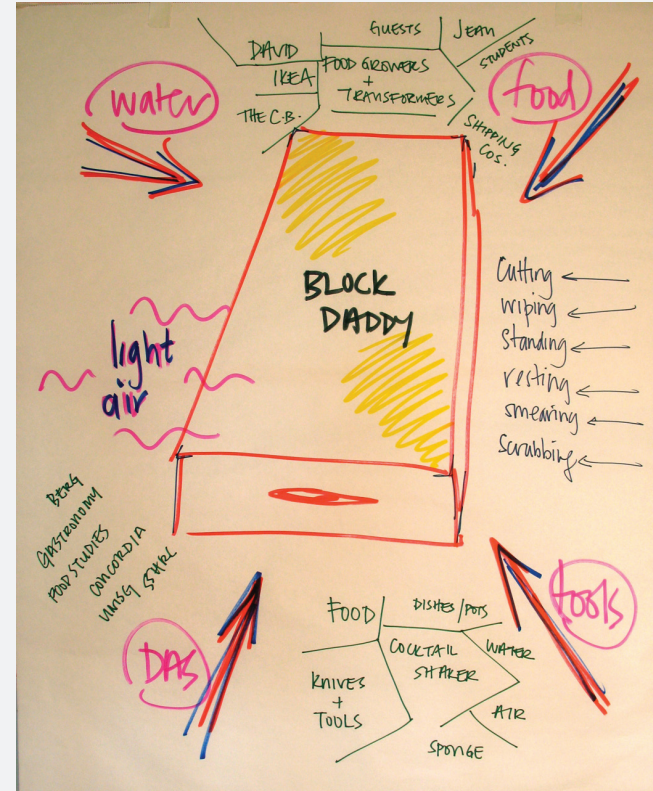
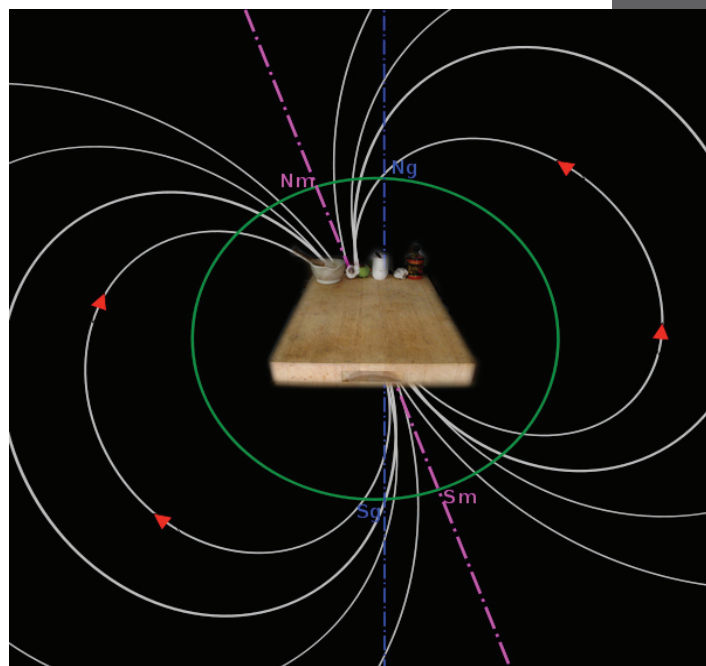
Surrounding the Chopping Block are the stakeholders on the following page, as well as the natural elements to which it is subject: air (including temperature variations), water, visible and non-visible radiation, sound (street noise, music, voices, mechanical appliance sounds), vibration (street, appliances, human). A key factor of the CB's social environment is that it has no interaction with its own kind—the closest species with which it has (infrequent) contact are a nylon cutting board and a maple-wood cheese board. Its perpetual companion, and its largest surface contact (other than air) is the wood-grain melamine countertop.



Figs. C-G: the CB's local environment and its neighbours
Fig. H (below): the CB's unknown power

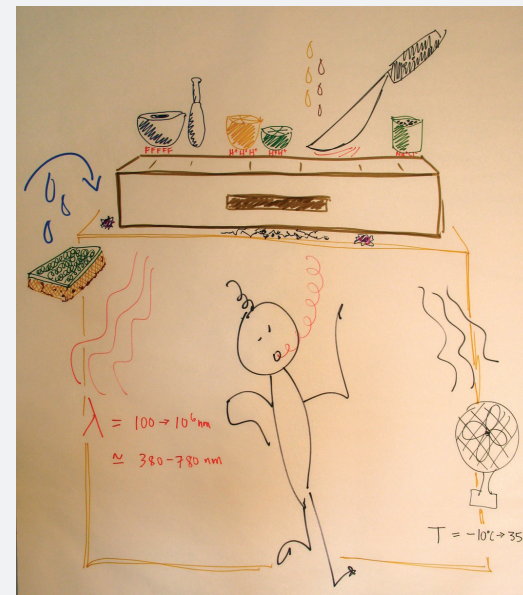
AUTOSUBJECTIVE

The purpose of the Lounge is to provide the CB with greater access to a subjective ecology—a physical space in which to examine and feel itself, as well as to recover/respond to the realities of its environmental and social ecologies. While the CB does not appear to have physically suffered during its objectification by DAS, the damage done to it as a thing, and the resulting actual need, are unknown. The Lounge therefore provides a best guess at what the CB needs, based on its outward appearance and a human-perspective interpretation of its thingness.

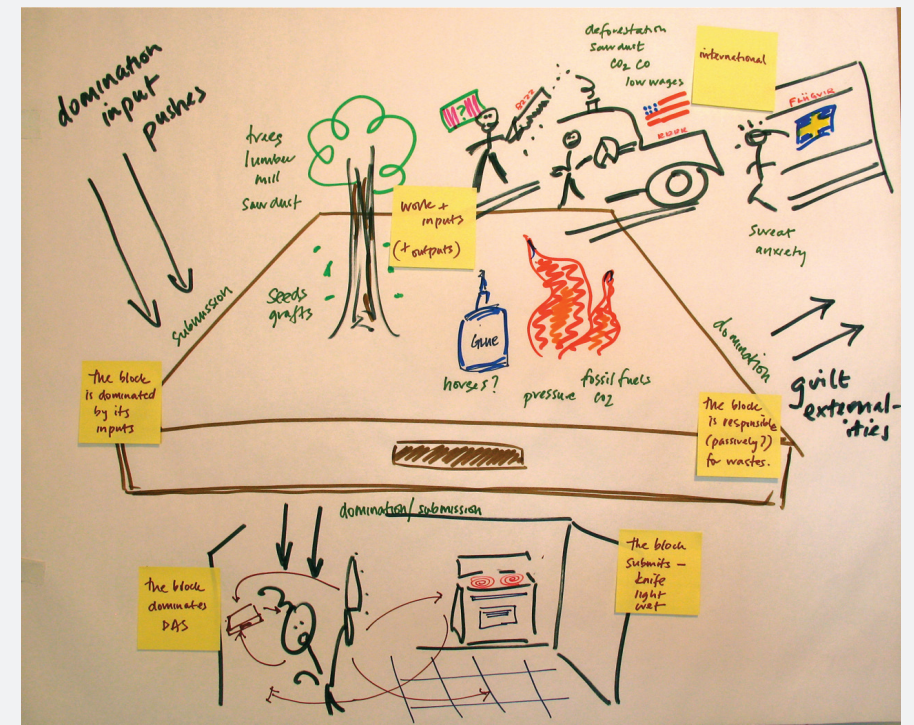


ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS AND STAKEHOLDERS

The CB is exposed to extensive physical and chemical impact due to its central role in food preparation. Further up the production cycle, it has been subject to other forces, as well as subject of a series of impacts on the community of stakeholders surrounding it:
 ...DAS
 ...DAS house guests, movers
 ...trees, lumberjacks, laborers, shippers, IKEA designers and retail employees
 ...food: salt, citrus, oils; fruit and vegetables; garlic; cured meat and cheese; bread; water and alcohol
 ...neighbors: the countertop, the sink, the knife block, the mortar, the salt and sugar cups, the cabinet and pans below, the blender, the fluorescent light, the cabinet and dishes above, the tiled floor, the tiled wall behind, electrical wires, crumbs and stains
 ...actants: food packaging; knives; sponges; soap; dishes; cocktail shaker; wine bottles; cutlery; pots and pans; Moka; oven mitts/trivets/hot pads; dust, crumbs, mold; air, heat, radiation, sound



Figs. I-K: the social and environmental impact on the CB in the day-to-day, and during its pre-purchase production process



THE DEVELOPING PROCESS

DOMINANCE/WEIGHT

Initial sketches were based on the assumption that the CB is a dominant requiring a space in which it could explore its submissive or passive nature. Extrapolating from the top/bottom notion of dominance, sex slings were adapted to provide the CB with both a submission posture as well as a sense of lightness through suspension.

The notion of tensegrity was also probed as an architectural component in the eventual Lounge. It is seen to both leverage the CB's heft, as well as illustrate a potential model of the larger food system, in which rigidity and control (domestication, food studies disciplines) have been imposed on the pliant and flowing, entropy-rich biogeophysical environment.

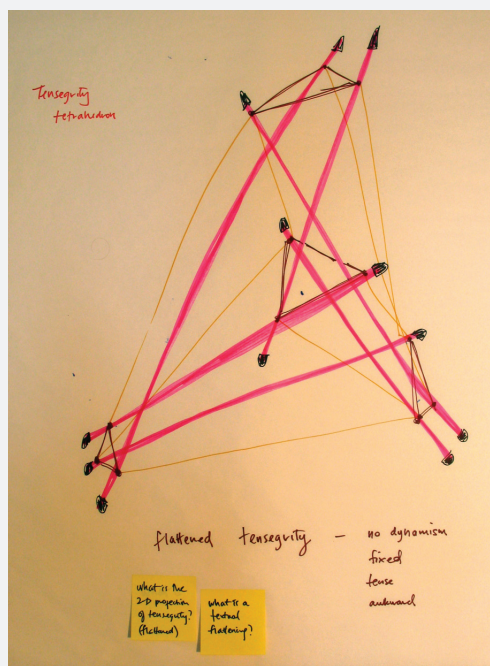
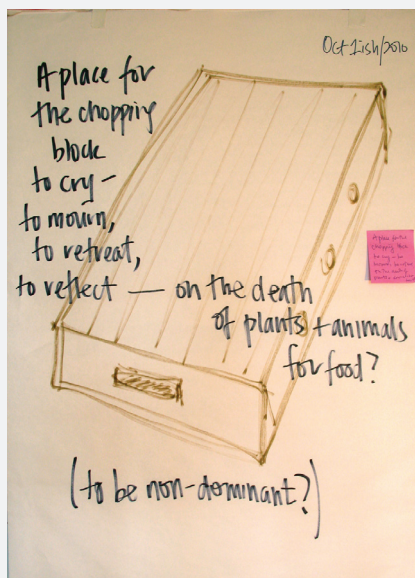
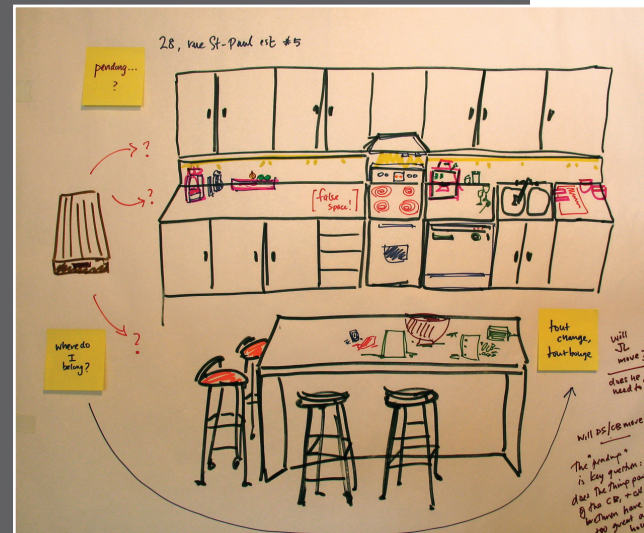
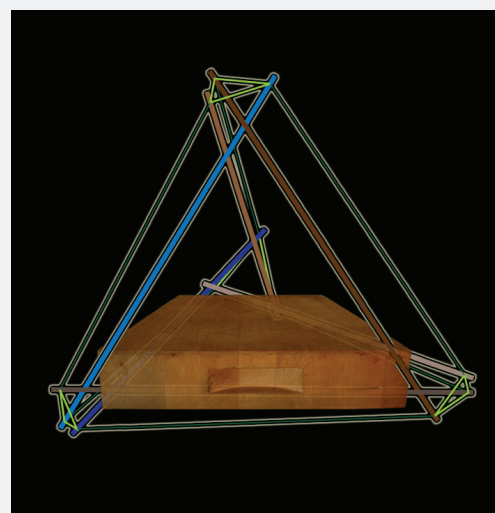
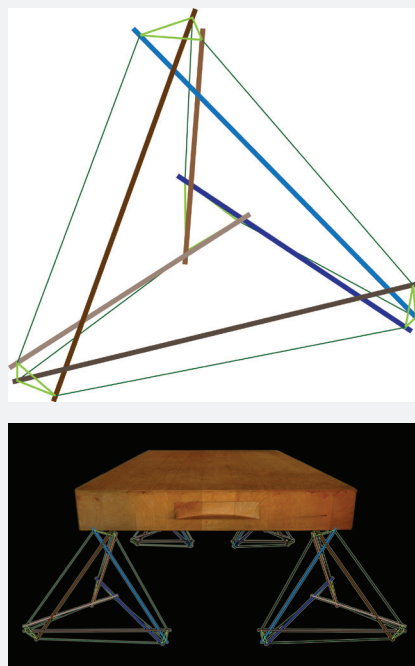


Fig. L (below): the CB as dominant, central power in the kitchen, directing the Lounge towards use as a "submission" space
Figs. M, N (right): seat- and harness-style submission slings

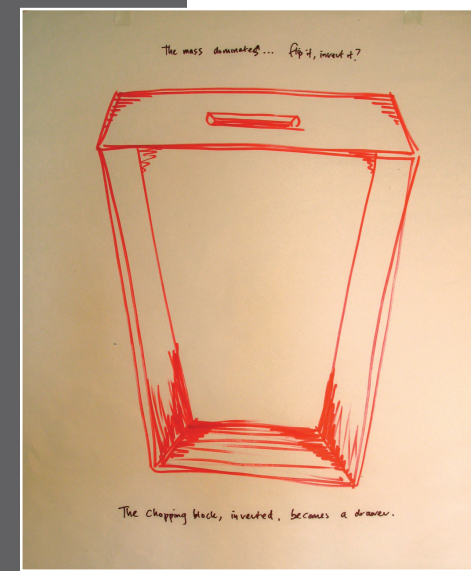


Figs. O-R (below): tensegrity models showing the stability of a dynamic equilibrium; a support architecture for the CB, providing lightness yet control and leveraging the CB's own substantial mass.



Figs. S, T (above): the two kitchens of the primary human stakeholders in the CB's environment

Fig. U (right): the CB, flipped inside out, becomes a drawer



SIMILARITY AND OTHERNESS

One of the questions raised by the summary of the CB's qualities surrounds its eventual possible relocation from the Szanto kitchen (Fig. S, left) to the Lessard kitchen (Fig. T, lower left). The two kitchens bear a number of similarities in that they are both relatively standard North American domestic kitchens in urban apartments, despite differences in arrangements of sink, stove, counters, and cabinets. The Lessard kitchen also features an island and is substantially larger in size, though with a more enclosed atmosphere, being in a loft lit mostly by skylights.

Like women in cultures that restrict their physical movement including movement outside domestic spaces, the CB is limited in its ability to enculture, first-hand, the world beyond its day-to-day environment. Yet it is not without power, much like these same imagined "other" women. Both within its space, and through the second-hand agency of its more mobile partner (DAS), the CB wields substantial power (even generating a design project about itself).

What would happen to the CB's power were it to be displaced from the Szanto kitchen? Would the otherness of the Lessard kitchen be disempowering? Would it find a space in the new kitchen or be submitted to the patterns of the more mobile—and less centralized—plastic cutting mats in use there? Would the now doubled human interaction give it more or less agency in the kitchen and the larger environment? Is its current power specifically derived from its relationship to DAS as a non-cohabitor, because it reflects his identity as an individual? Would it thus have less power in a shared Szanto/Lessard space, or is its thing-power truly independent of human objectivity?

THE DEVELOPING PROCESS

THE CB'S QUALITIES

The Lounge is intended to provide a counterbalance to the impact of the CB's day-to-day existence, an impact that is in part due to its material and spatial characteristics. These sketches respond to those qualities, and explore potential attributes of the Lounge.

woodiness/thickness:

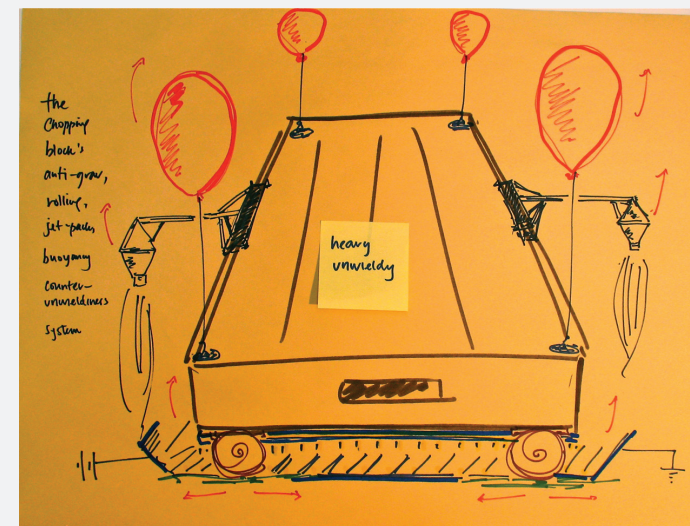
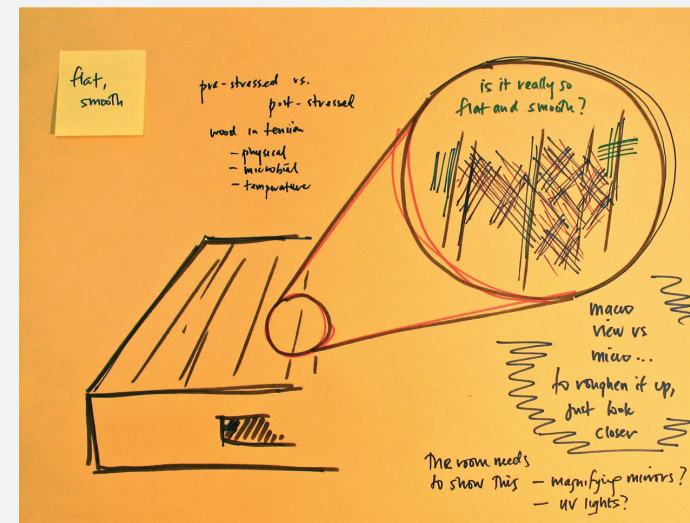
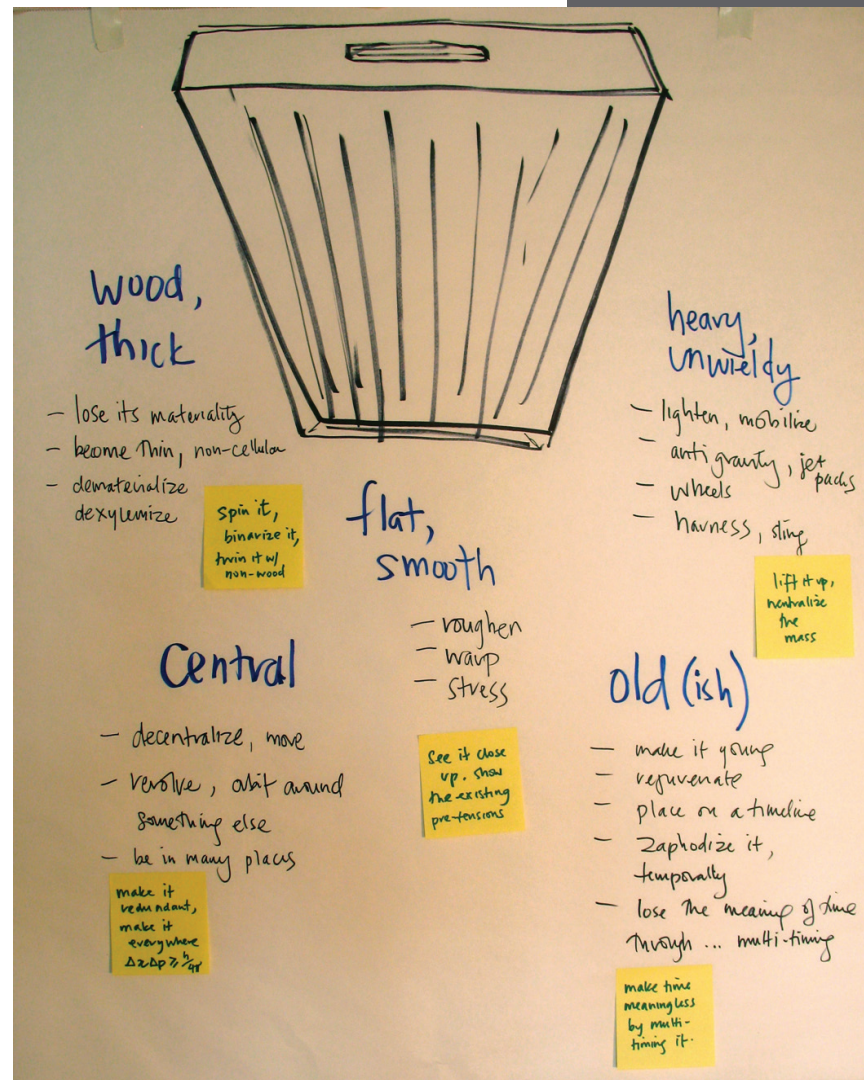
A binary system of phloem and xylem makes wood both rigid and flexible in its living state. Stripped of its water-bearing system of phloem, the xylem-only CB requires a partner (DAS?) to offset the unidimensionality of its dry state.

centrality:

To lessen its burden as central preparation location in the kitchen, the CB should be everywhere at once—one in a system of redundancies.

Fig. V (right): the massive and perceived-to-be dominant CB, and its material and spatial qualities.

Figs. W-Bb (below and following page): exploratory responses to the CB's qualities



flatness/smoothness:

The CB is not flat or smooth in the micro view. In the Lounge, we need to see the CB up close, its crevices and texture, its chemical and microbial vibrancy.

heaviness/unwieldiness:

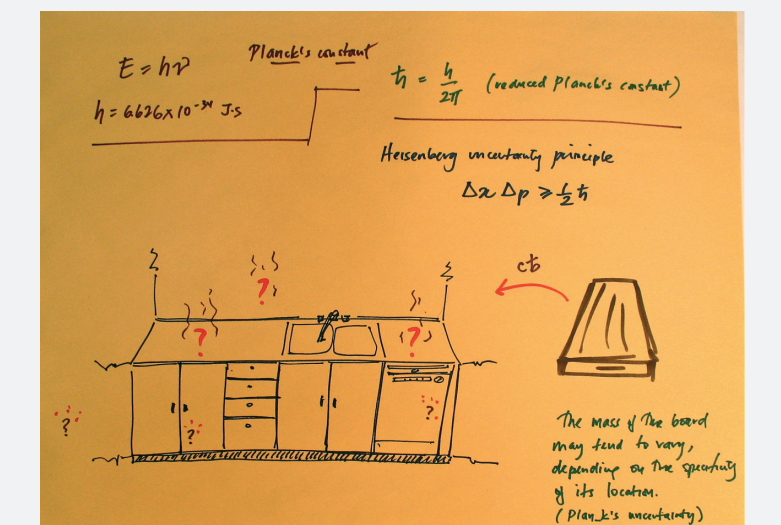
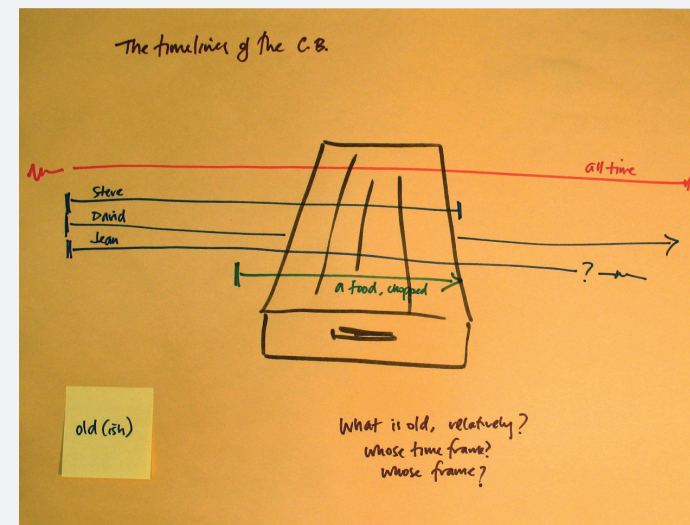
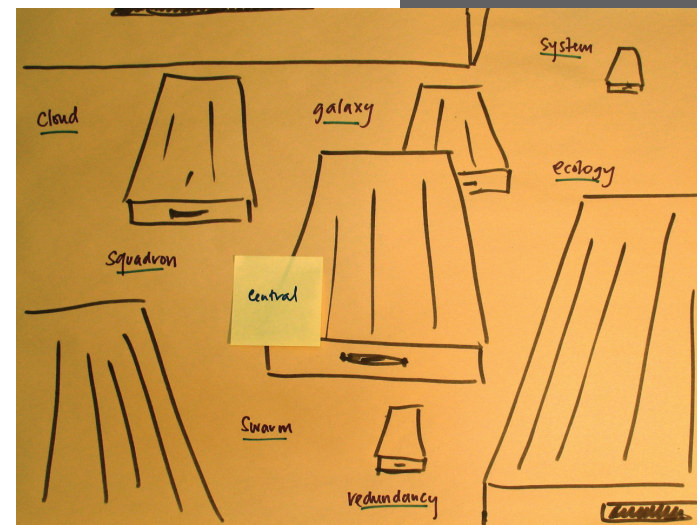
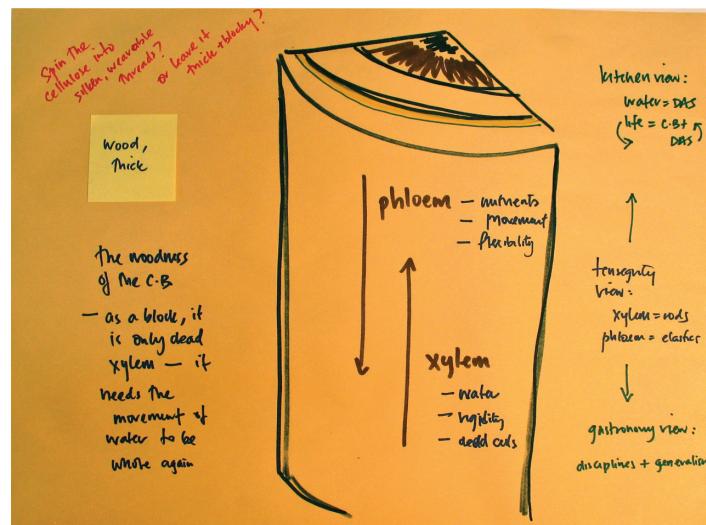
The CB's density and simplicity of design (inset handles, squared edges) mean that raising it up or rendering it light would require both substantial force and physical intervention. To maintain the existing design principles as well as those of sustainability, the CB's own mass should be used as counterweight, using pulleys or perhaps a tensegrity-inspired sling.

relative age:

Relative to DAS, and the time lines of his relationships, the CB is old; relative to all time, it is but a blip. Relative to the life of a green onion being chopped into soup, the CB is ancient. The relativism of time must be apparent in the Lounge, or it should be made to suppress a sense of time entirely.

probable location:

Its very mass makes the CB's probable location both certain and uncertain, depending on the framing. In the Szanto kitchen, it can be closely localized; in the eventuality that it displaces to the Lessard kitchen, its exact coordinates will remain unknowable.



THE LOUNGE

Through this investigation of the Chopping Block's status and nature as a *thing*, both through its materiality and the interactions and processes that compose it, an expansive list of the Lounge's attributes can be assembled. It would be based on a modular architecture made of materials that share a common and ethical materiality, and which entwine each other's rigidities and flexibilities to produce Fullerian, low-impact integrity. It would fold and unfold into itself, eliding the restrictions of inside and outside, and in the process dispersing the Chopping Block's humanity-imposed objectness. The Lounge would empower the Chopping Block without undermining its existing strengths and relationships, make it light without negating its heft, make it submissive and pliant without destroying the very qualities that enable it to perform its roles in the kitchen. Unguents and cleansers, dispensed at the Chopping Block's will, would ease away chemical and microbial damage, soothe the physical impact of its daily existence, and extend its functional and sensorial life. These salves would not artificially fix or stabilize the Chopping Block's organic and decaying nature, they would simply offset its exposures. Time, the Chopping Block's rational companion, would keep ticking in the Lounge (perceptibly, subtly), and change would still come. The material environment of the

Lounge would record the narratives that wind about the Chopping Block in an non-visible gyre, and that render its thingness visible and valuable and larger than the space and atoms it occupies. Perhaps these narratives would emanate from the door to the Lounge, reminding the Chopping Block during its on-duty hours that the Lounge is there, waiting, and calling it back when the work day is done. The space itself, in exchange for the permission it grants to enter, would demand an observance of ethics, requiring certain behaviours but reinforcing the Chopping Block's identity and sense of belonging. The walls and hard surfaces of the Lounge would reflect these overlapping, temporally iterated echoes of identity, so that the Chopping Block feels a sense of community, non-centrality, and occasional anonymity.

Ultimately, the Lounge would give the Chopping Block a balance, a complement, a dressing that makes it feel its own thingness. The Lounge, fitting the Chopping Block perfectly, would be absolutely necessary to it, and thus make the Chopping Block feel absolutely necessary, independent of its role as a surface on which humans cut or serve food. The Lounge would continually re-form itself around the sensed needs of the Chopping Block, like a garment knitting and sewing itself around a body, becoming the thing's nonidentity and complementing its physical representation, to make it whole, complete, itself.

The temptation to design this Lounge in real space is strong, or at least to render it visually with all the devices and furnishings that would enact the qualities described. It could be built into the cabinets above or below the kitchen countertop, with bungees and cables attached to pulleys and mirrors that would raise or lower the Chopping Block at the touch of a button or the excretion of a mote of cellulose. But to do so would be contrary to the intent behind this exploration of human and non-human things, and of the recognition that things (specifically food things) require. A materially constructed Lounge, made of matter not-yet-realized as vibrant (as the Chopping Block now is), might regress the Chopping Block by embedding it in a dull, objectified environment. For now, the imagined space will remain a black box, free of imposed usages, and only for the Chopping Block to determine and design around itself.

Numerous readings and discussions from DART 446: *Encultured Space* have influenced and informed this design project. The following key themes have emerged from the references indicated (citations at right):

becoming complete, alterity:
Hedwig and the Angry Inch

cocoon construction: Bennett
(citing Epicurus), Latour

decay: Bennett

decentralized DNA:
Kitchen Stories

doorways, space, ethics,
and behaviour: Connor

gesture and narrative: de Certeau
and in-class discussions

inside/outside, other: Colomina,
Eckhardt, Grosz, Latour, Yasmeen,

lines of production:
The Story of Stuff

nonidentity: Bennett
(citing Theodor Adorno)

poetry: Kingsolver

stakeholders: Krippendorff

traces left behind: Calvino

virtuality and potential:
Grosz, Simondon

REFERENCES

- Bennett, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Calvino, Italo. 1997. *Invisible Cities*. Trans. William Weaver. New York: Vintage.
- Colomina, Beatriz. 2003. "Skinless Architecture" from *Thesis*. Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Bauhau-Universität Weimar, Heft 3.
- Connor, Kimberly Rae. 2006. "The Fifth Corner: Hip Hop's New Geometry of Adolescent Religiosity." *Implicit Religion* 9:1. 7-28.
- de Certeau, Michel and Luce Giard and Pierre Mayol. 1998. "Mythical Texts of the City" in *The Practice of Everyday Life, vol. 2: Living and Cooking*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 141-3.
- Eckhardt, Giana M. and Michael J. Houston. "Cultural Paradoxes Reflected in Brand Meaning: McDonald's in Shanghai, China" in *Journal of International Marketing* 10:2. 68-82.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. 2001. *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. Dir. John Cameron Mitchell. Perf. John Cameron Mitchell, Miriam Shor, and Stephen Trask. 2001.
- Kingsolver, Barbara. 2003. "A Good Farmer" in *The Nation*, 277:14. 11-18
- Kitchen Stories* (orig. title: *Salmer fra kjøkkenet*). Dir. Bent Hamer. Perf. Tomas Norström, Joachim Calmeyer and Bjørn Floberg. 2003. MGM, 2004. DVD.
- Krippendorff, Klaus. 2006. "Stakeholders in Design" in *The Semantic Turn: A New Foundation for Design*. Boca Raton: CRC/Taylor & Francis, 2006. 63-65.
- Latour, Bruno. 2008. "A Cautious Prometheus? A Few Steps Toward a Philosophy of Design (with Special Attention to Peter Sloterdijk)" downloaded from <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/articles/2008.html>, 9/6/2010.
- Simondon, Gilbert. 2007. "Technical Individualization" in *Interact or Die!* Ed. Joke Brouwer and Arjen Mulder. Rotterdam: V2_Publishing/NAi Publishers. 206-215.
- Story of Stuff, The*. Dir. Louis Fox. Writ. Annie Leonard. Free Range Studios, 2007. Online (www.storyofstuff.org)
- Yasmeen, Gisèle. 2006. "Bangkok's Foodscape: Public Eating, Gender Relations, and Urban Change" in *Studies in Contemporary Thailand* 16. Ed. Erick Cohen. Bangkok: White Lotus Press.

APPENDICES

- ...DART 446 journal entry syntheses
- ...sketches, illustrations, photo illustrations