

Material Translation and Artistic Representation of “Breathable Boundaries” in the Contemporary Urban Context



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Abstract: In contemporary urban life, home can no longer be understood simply as a stable architectural shelter. Rent, migration, domestic labour and the constant circulation of information have weakened the traditional promise of privacy, rest and belonging. This paper redefines the concept of the “breathable boundary” from a technical architectural interface into a psychological, visual and material threshold. Rather than focusing on ventilation, façade systems or ecological performance, it examines how boundaries operate between protection and exposure, withdrawal and connection, image and lived reality. Drawing on theories of domestic space, urban alienation, transitional experience and social reproduction, the paper analyses how home is shaped by memory, labour, social relations and material perception. It also responds to the problem of architecture as image, especially in artistic practices based on painting, photography, textile, traces and installation rather than built structure. Through the discussion of Do Ho Suh, Rachel Whiteread, Mona Hatoum, Project Row Houses, Chloé Zhao’s *Nomadland* and Jae Ho Jung’s painting practice, the study argues that material translation does not merely convert one material into another. Instead, it transforms unstable spatial experiences into visible, tactile and critical forms. A breathable boundary is therefore neither a solid wall nor a condition of total openness, but a fragile threshold that allows the subject to pause, recover and reconnect without being entirely absorbed by external pressure.

Keywords: breathable boundary, psychological shelter, urban alienation, architectural image, material translation, contemporary art

Introduction

The concept of the “breathable boundary” is often used to describe a spatial interface that allows air, light or vision to pass through. In architectural and urban design discourse, it is usually connected with physical permeability, environmental comfort and the improvement of spatial quality. Such an understanding is useful, but it also limits the concept to a functional level. Within contemporary art practice, breathability can be expanded beyond a technical condition. It can refer to a psychological and visual threshold through which the subject negotiates protection, exposure and relation.

This paper begins with the instability of home in contemporary urban life. A house may still provide walls, doors, rooms and daily objects, yet these elements do not automatically create a sense of belonging. Under the pressures of rent, migration,

labour and digital communication, domestic space is increasingly shaped by forces that enter from outside the home. The interior is no longer a fully protected zone separated from urban pressure. The question of home is therefore not only architectural, but also social, psychological and material. The central question of this paper is: when does a dwelling become home, for whom, and under what conditions?

This question is closely related to artistic practice based on images and materials rather than direct architectural construction. In painting, photography, textile and installation, architecture often appears as a fragment, trace, surface or memory. Windows, house-like lines, fabric, stones, wood grain and water marks do not build a real house. Instead, they produce partial images of shelter. These images can suggest protection, but they may also reveal

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instability. For this reason, the paper proposes the “breathable boundary” as a critical artistic framework. It is not a literal building skin, but a way of understanding how material forms can hold the tension between safety and vulnerability, withdrawal and reconnection.

1. From Architectural Shelter to Psychological Boundary

Gaston Bachelard understands the house as a container of memory, imagination and inner life (Bachelard, 1994). His theory is useful because it shows that home is more than a physical structure. Rooms, corners and enclosed spaces become meaningful because they allow the subject to gather memory and produce a sense of interiority. In this sense, home is not only where one lives; it is also where one can feel emotionally located.

However, this poetic understanding of domestic space becomes limited when it is placed within contemporary urban conditions. Bachelard’s account tends to trust the protective power of the interior. It suggests that the house can hold the subject and shelter inner life. Yet in contemporary cities, the interior is not fully separate from external pressure. Rent, temporary contracts, migration, work demands and digital communication enter the room and change how privacy is experienced. A dwelling can remain physically enclosed while the feeling of protection becomes unstable.

Anthony Vidler’s discussion of the architectural uncanny helps to complicate this ideal image of home (Vidler, 1992). Familiar space can become strange when its meaning fails. The domestic interior is not automatically warm or secure; it can also become a site of anxiety, alienation and displacement. In this sense, the loss of home does not always mean the loss of a building. It may also mean the loss of psychological security within a space that still exists. This shift is important because it changes the role of boundary. If home cannot be guaranteed by walls alone, then boundary cannot simply mean separation. A boundary that only closes may offer protection, but it may also produce isolation. A boundary that opens completely may allow connection, but it may also expose the subject to pressure. The breathable boundary emerges between these two extremes. It is neither complete closure nor total openness. It is a threshold that regulates distance.

Helen Hester and Nick Srnicek further show that the home is not only a place of rest, but also a

site of unpaid domestic labour and time pressure (Hester & Srnicek, 2023). This point is crucial for a critical discussion of home. The domestic interior may shelter the subject, but it may also reproduce exhaustion through cleaning, cooking, caring and emotional labour. The idea of home as refuge therefore needs to be questioned. Home is not a neutral private space outside social systems. It is one of the places where social and economic relations are organised.

Seen from this perspective, the breathable boundary is not simply a poetic metaphor. It responds to a real contradiction in contemporary domestic life. People need protection from external pressure, but they also need relation, care and social connection. A completely closed space cannot resolve this contradiction. What is needed is a boundary that can filter, soften and delay pressure while still allowing the subject to remain connected to the world.

2. Boundary, Door and Transitional Space

A boundary is often understood as a line of separation. It divides inside from outside, private from public and self from other. This understanding is visually clear, but it is too rigid for the complexity of lived space. Georg Simmel’s discussion of the door offers a more flexible model. Unlike a wall, a door both divides and connects; it makes separation visible while allowing movement across it (Simmel, 1994). The door does not cancel the boundary. Instead, it transforms boundary into a negotiable threshold.

This dual function is central to the idea of the breathable boundary. The breathable boundary is not a stronger wall. It is a threshold that regulates relation. It protects without sealing, and connects without exposing the subject completely. It allows withdrawal, but does not turn withdrawal into disappearance. It allows return, but not as a forced absorption into external pressure.

D.W. Winnicott’s concept of transitional space helps to explain this condition (Winnicott, 1971). Between inner psychic life and external reality, transitional space allows play, imagination and negotiation. It is neither purely internal nor purely external. If this idea is brought into the discussion of home, psychological shelter should not be understood as escape from the world. It is closer to a temporary space in which the self can regain distance and reorganise its relation to reality.

This understanding also requires a social dimension. bell hooks argues that homeplace can become a site where dignity, care and subjectivity are restored (hooks, 1990). Her argument shifts home away from architecture alone and towards relation. Home is not only a structure; it is also a practice of care. Sara Ahmed also reminds us that comfort and safety are not universal experiences (Ahmed, 2004). The same space may comfort one body while excluding another. A room, neighbourhood or domestic object may feel protective to one person and threatening to another.

Therefore, the breathable boundary should not be treated as a neutral aesthetic form. It must be understood as a situated relation between body, memory, pressure and the possibility of connection. The question is not simply whether a boundary is open or closed. The more important question is who is being protected, from what, and in order to return to which form of relation.

This approach also prevents the concept of psychological shelter from becoming overly comforting. If shelter is understood only as personal healing, it may ignore the social conditions that make shelter necessary. The task of critical art is not to promise complete safety, but to make visible the unstable conditions under which safety is desired, constructed and interrupted. A breathable boundary is valuable precisely because it remains incomplete. It shows that protection is necessary, but never fully guaranteed.

3. Architecture as Image and Material Translation

Since this research is developed through painting, photography, textile and installation, architecture appears less as a built object than as an image. This distinction is important. A built house shelters the body physically, while an architectural image shelters only indirectly. It carries memory, desire, anxiety or loss, but it cannot provide actual protection. Therefore, when architecture appears in artistic practice as a window, line, surface or trace, it becomes a site of both imagination and critical distance.

Windows, house-like lines, wood grain, fabric, stones and water marks do not construct a real house. Instead, they produce visual fragments of shelter. A window may suggest both looking out and being looked at. A line shaped like a house may suggest enclosure, but its thinness also reveals fragility. A

semi-transparent surface may soften visibility, but it does not fully hide what is behind it. In this sense, architecture as image does not simply represent space. It processes the psychological effect of space.

This shift is especially important in relation to rent and migration. In temporary housing, the dwelling is often used but not fully possessed. The room is lived in, but it remains conditional. It may be occupied for a short time and then left behind. For migrants and students, home may be divided between places, languages and memories. In such conditions, architecture can easily become an image: remembered, photographed, transferred, folded or partially lost.

However, architectural images also carry risk. If images of displacement are made too delicate, they may aestheticise insecurity. Chloé Zhao's *Nomadland* provides a useful example. The film presents the van as a mobile shelter, but its cinematic framing also transforms economic precarity into a visually sensitive and at times poetic narrative (Searchlight Pictures, 2020). This does not make the film invalid. Rather, it shows that artistic images must be critically examined for how they frame vulnerability. The viewer does not encounter poverty or unstable housing directly, but through choices of landscape, light, editing, character and silence.

This issue is relevant to material practice. If fabric, stones or images are used only to create a beautiful atmosphere of fragility, the work may soften the social reality of instability. But if material fragility is connected to labour, trace, pressure and incompleteness, it can become more critical. The question is not whether the work looks delicate, but whether delicacy is allowed to carry tension.

Jae Ho Jung's painting practice offers another model. His works record worn urban surfaces and buildings shaped by accumulated time (Korea Artist Prize, 2024). Rather than treating painting as a simple image of the city, Jung allows the painted surface to hold duration, erosion and historical pressure. In this sense, image becomes a material record rather than a simple representation. This approach is relevant to the use of stones, fabric and water marks. A stone leaves pressure after it is removed; a stain records contact between water and surface; a transferred image becomes blurred or incomplete. These traces show that shelter may survive not as a stable structure, but as a material remainder.

Material translation should therefore not be understood only as the conversion of one material into another. In this paper, it refers to the process by which emotional and spatial conditions become visible through material decisions. Weight, softness, translucency, repetition, gaps and stains all become ways of translating unstable experiences of home.

4. Artistic Representations of Home, Absence and Relation

Do Ho Suh's fabric architectural works translate former homes into soft, translucent and portable structures ([National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea, 2013](#)). His work is significant because it releases architecture from fixed location while preserving its memory and outline. Home becomes foldable, mobile and psychologically present. The fabric structure is not a complete shelter, but it carries the shape of former dwelling. Its translucency also creates a tension between presence and absence. The viewer can see the architectural outline, but the work remains fragile and permeable.

Rachel Whiteread's *House* approaches home differently. By casting the interior void of a domestic building, Whiteread made absence solid and public ([Artangel, 1993](#)). The work transformed the negative space of domestic life into a monumental sculptural form. However, *House* also raises a critical question: who has the right to turn a lived home into a public artwork? Its relationship with demolition, urban change and local controversy shows that home is never only a formal or material problem. It is also a social and political one. The work's strength lies partly in this contradiction. It made domestic absence visible, but it also exposed the tension between artistic representation and lived community.

Mona Hatoum's *Homebound* further unsettles the domestic interior by transforming furniture and household objects into a field of tension and danger ([Tate, 2016](#)). Kitchen utensils, wires and furniture become charged with threat. The work refuses the sentimental idea that home is always safe. Domestic objects no longer promise comfort; they become unstable, controlled and potentially harmful. Hatoum's work is important because it shows that anxiety can already exist inside the home, rather than arriving only from outside.

Although Suh, Whiteread and Hatoum all question the stability of home, human relationships often remain indirect in their works. Home appears through architectural memory, sculptural absence or

dangerous objects. This is where Project Row Houses offers an important contrast. Founded in Houston's Third Ward, the project connects art, housing, community and social support ([Project Row Houses, 2025](#)). It suggests that home is not only represented through objects or architecture, but also maintained through collective care and shared use.

This comparison clarifies the critical position of the breathable boundary. If it remains only a fragile surface or poetic image, it risks becoming aestheticised shelter. If it is connected to labour, migration and relation, it can become a more critical artistic method. The question is not only how to represent home, but how to understand the conditions through which home becomes possible or impossible. This also has implications for artistic practice. Empty spaces, absent bodies, soft fabric and traces can suggest vulnerability, but they should not erase the social relations behind that vulnerability. A trace implies that someone has touched, carried, used or left something behind. A door wedge implies a body controlling access. A stone holding fabric down implies force, weight and temporary stabilisation. These objects can therefore point towards relationships even when no figure is directly shown.

5. Material Practice and Breathable Boundary

In this practice, material translation does not mean technical transformation alone. It means translating psychological and spatial conditions into visible and tactile form. The works discussed here do not attempt to build a complete home. Instead, they test how temporary shelter might be formed through image, weight, surface, trace and bodily perception.

A Tree of Stories uses the image of a downward-growing tree whose branches fold inward like a tent, shell or temporary shelter. The house-like lines drawn along the branches do not form a stable dwelling. Instead, they create an incomplete boundary between nature, memory and shelter. The tree suggests protection, but it does not close completely. The gaps between branches are important because they allow vulnerability to remain visible. The work therefore offers shelter as a fragile condition rather than a fixed solution.

In *House in Blue*, wood grain, cracks and irregular surfaces become part of the image. The house-like lines drawn on wood appear temporary and unstable, as if the idea of home were being held together by a surface that already carries time and pressure. The material resists smooth representation.

Wood is not a neutral support; it brings its own history, texture and irregularity into the image. This resistance prevents the house from becoming an ideal symbol. Home appears as something drawn across difficulty rather than securely built.

Lines Left Behind uses shells, fabric and repeated labour to create an ordered structure interrupted by gaps. The repeated acts of collecting, piercing, threading and sewing create a sense of discipline, but the missing parts interrupt completion. These gaps resist the demand for total order and allow exhaustion, hesitation and incompleteness to remain visible. The work does not represent home directly, but it reflects the labour through which fragile structures are repeatedly made, repaired and left unfinished. In this sense, material process becomes a way of thinking about domestic and emotional labour.

Recent work with stones, door wedges and semi-transparent fabric develops this inquiry further. Stones hold fabric down and leave traces after removal. Their function is both practical and symbolic. They stabilise a soft material temporarily, but they also show that stability depends on pressure. Door wedges face the wall, suggesting the control of an unseen threshold. A door wedge does not build a wall. It regulates opening and closing. It keeps a boundary in a temporary state. This makes it a precise object for thinking about the breathable boundary.

Semi-transparent fabric allows images to appear and disappear, softening the boundary between wall, image and space. When fabric extends from wall to floor and is held by stones, it resembles a tent, curtain, shelter or collapsed wall, but it never becomes any of these completely. Its form remains uncertain. This uncertainty is important because it prevents the work from becoming a literal model of home. Instead, it creates a situation in which viewers encounter the instability of shelter through their bodies and perception.

The relationship between these materials also creates a tension between softness and weight. Fabric suggests permeability, movement and fragility. Stone suggests pressure, duration and physical resistance. The door wedge suggests control and threshold. Together, they create a boundary that is not fixed but negotiated. This is the material logic of the breathable boundary: it is held rather than built, adjusted rather than completed, and experienced rather than simply viewed.

Through these works, psychological shelter becomes a temporary arrangement. It does not solve urban alienation, but it makes its emotional structure visible. It shows how the subject may seek distance without disappearing, and how materials can hold that distance in an unstable form. The critical value of the work lies in this incompleteness. It refuses both the fantasy of perfect home and the total collapse of shelter. It stays between the two.

Conclusion

This paper has reconsidered the breathable boundary as a critical concept in contemporary art practice. Rather than treating it as a technical interface for ventilation, façade design or ecological performance, it defines the breathable boundary as a psychological and material threshold between protection and exposure. Home is not automatically produced by walls, rooms or domestic objects. It is shaped by rent, migration, labour, memory and social relation.

The discussion of Bachelard, Vidler, Hester and Srnicek, Simmel, Winnicott, hooks and Ahmed shows that home must be understood as both psychological and social. The artistic examples of Suh, Whiteread, Hatoum, *Project Row Houses*, Zhao and Jung further reveal that architecture can operate as memory, absence, danger, community or image. Within this framework, material practice becomes a way to think through the instability of home rather than simply represent it.

The expanded understanding of material translation is central to this argument. Materials do not only support artistic expression; they actively shape thought. Fabric, wood, shells, stones, door wedges, water marks and transferred images all carry different forms of pressure, permeability and trace. They make visible the unstable relation between shelter and exposure. A breathable boundary is therefore not the opposite of connection. It is the condition that makes connection bearable. It allows the subject to withdraw without disappearing, and to return without being entirely consumed by external pressure. As an artistic method, it offers a fragile but critical way of understanding home in the contemporary urban context.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that he has no conflicts of interest to this work.

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