

Working Space: Interiors as provisional compositions

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Abstract: The conference theme of occupation and constructed space facilitates an engagement with several ideas currently shaping interior design thinking, discourse and practice. Occupation, inhabitation, dwelling – the production of a place for people to inhabit, dwell, occupy – are a focus of interior design. While these terms are often used interchangeably they bring with them various theoretical frameworks and philosophical underpinnings. The term ‘occupation’ not only conjures ideas of residential living but is hard to prise from nuances related to military occupations, the occupation of territories, and colonialism. The conference provocation invites a thinking through the concept of ‘occupation’ as a way to locate some assumed givens occupying interior design as a discipline and through this, open up the potential for new ways of thinking and practising interior design which may in turn lead to different kinds of occupations and interiors.

Key words: ‘working space’, transformation, time, employ, design, interior.

Introduction

The title of this paper *Working Space* is taken from a book written by the abstract artist Frank Stella. Stella’s book links abstract art with sixteenth century painting and in particular the work of the Baroque artist, Caravaggio. He claims Caravaggio initiated a shift in pictorial space which can be mapped through to abstract art. Stella writes: ‘... the aim of art is to create space – space that is not compromised by decoration or illustration, space in which the subjects of paintings can live’¹ and ‘by shaping its own space, painting makes itself incompatible with architecture, competing directly with it for control of the available space’.² This discussion around the space of painting and the desire to shape and occupy space distinct from architecture resonates with the practice of interior design – one is reminded of the conflict between architects and upholsterers in the late nineteenth century which is pinpointed as the catalyst which led to the emergence of interior design as an independent profession. Stella elaborates later in the book: ‘What painting wants more than anything else is working space – space to grow with and expand into, pictorial space that is capable of direction and movement, pictorial space that encourages unlimited orientation and extension. Painting doesn’t want to be confined by boundaries of edge and surface. ... [instead] live, real, extendable and expandable pictorial space’.³ One can see this in Stella’s work where the concept of the framed canvas is challenged and tested. This notion of working space as a working *of* space highlights the employment definition of occupation. ‘Employ’ is defined as to enfold, to involve – its etymology coming from *in* = ‘in’ + *plicare* = ‘to fold’.

In relation to interior design, the term ‘occupation’ therefore can highlight two distinct ways of thinking about the designing and design of interiors – the first as an occupation of an existing space, the second as an enfolding and fabrication of space which makes inhabitation possible. A design process that responds to existing conditions is implicit where there is a negotiation with constructed space. The implication for the practice of interior design is that its potential is always situated in a dialectical relation and hence, is already given to some degree by the existing which it is the task of the interior designer to identify and make present. Transgressions can occur – yet by definition remain dialectically defined.

Working space – occupation becomes occupying as employing – invokes a different kind of position where space is not assumed as pre-existing but produced. The temporal becomes a critical and vital condition. In relation to interior design, the question of occupation and occupying space is then not equated with negotiating existing conditions and spatial enclosures but a question of *designing* interiors is posed. While this can include the concept of spatial enclosure, the question provokes a problematic around what and how might an interior be designed. Importantly this shifts to a question of designing and making as distinct from knowing and contextualising. Occupation becomes a process of transformation, of making relations. Interior design shifts from a practice necessarily equated with the design of inside space to a practice of interiorization. This introduces time as a dynamic and provokes a re-conceptualization of interior as temporal framing as distinct from a spatial enclosure.

This paper draws on research conducted through the production and presentation of exhibitions which engage a curatorial practice with spatial and temporal conditions to think through questions of interior and design. Two exhibitions are specifically addressed: *Urban Interior Occupation* and *Advance/Retreat. Three experiments in transdisciplinary collaboration*.⁴ An engagement with occupation in both senses of the term shaped each exhibition – how gallery space was occupied and transformed through different occupations/employing/enfolding spatial and temporal relations. Two distinctive approaches became apparent: 1) determining beforehand through an idea or a schemata how to occupy the space of the gallery i.e. a design for occupation – spatial enclosure; and 2) a way of working and occupying where the relations between practices, people and spaces is dynamic and produced through occupying as employing and temporal framing.

Proposition

As introduced above, the discourse addressing the discipline of interior design is emerging along different trajectories. One positions interior design as concerned with the inside of buildings. This trajectory is dominant within the discourse where there is constant elision between the terms ‘interior design’ and ‘interior architecture’. The idea of interior as situated within existing conditions establishes a particular idea of occupation where space and time are pre-existing entities – ‘a package of sense’⁵. This kind of positioning of interior design is evident in the discourse of interior architecture and interior decoration where the physical built environment is positioned as existing prior to, and as the main point of reference for, the design of interiors. Despite claims that this is a ‘fundamental’⁶ of interior design, another emerging trajectory attends to the concept of interior poised as a question and problematic within contemporary culture.

The philosopher Elizabeth Grosz’s concept of the frame as a process of framing which creates a ‘temporary consistency’ is useful to consider in relation to this trajectory of interiorization. Grosz writes: ‘The frame is what establishes territory out of the chaos that is the earth. ... the constitution of territory is the fabrication of the space in which sensations may emerge, from which a rhythm, a tone, colouring, weight, texture may be extracted and moved elsewhere, may function for its own sake, may resonate for the sake of intensity alone’.⁷ This proposition offers a way of thinking about the design of interiors where the exterior is poised as potential that is fleeting and elusive as distinct from existing conditions.⁸ It is not a question of knowing or understanding existing conditions so much as working and employing dynamic forces.

In picking up this idea of temporal framing as distinct from spatial enclosure in conjunction with occupation (or territory as Grosz terms it), design as a verb rather than a noun becomes amplified and interior design as the designing of interiors engages with the question of interior as enfolding. As process, the temporal becomes implicated in design and perhaps more than negotiating constructed space, one is working with employing and occupying multiple temporalities. The critical idea here is that this shift in emphasis enables one to engage interior design practice and theory/discourse with a different kind of thinking from one which privileges existing space as spatial enclosure and representation.

The position here is not to argue that one is better than another but to open up the potential of interior design. This opening of the given enclosure/box is motivated by a desire to resist what appears to be an increasing essentialization of the discipline. Referred to as *the* architectural interior and *the* human interior, concepts of identity, essence, subjectivity, individual and associated qualities such as comfort, privacy, personal, interiority are assumed. This kind of essentialist thinking becomes even more dominant as the exterior is positioned as a threatening force in terms of climate change with environmental and psychological impacts. A perceived need to retreat from a chaotic exterior to seek refuge and protection in the interior reinforces binary oppositions between interior and exterior with essentialism affirmed through a desire for stability and the known.

Interiorizations

Within the emerging discourse of interior design which seeks to establish a theoretical positioning for the discipline, various ideas of interior, occupation and the practice of interior design are being articulated and positioned. A clear trajectory is one of interior design as a practice concerned with negotiating existing space. Graeme Brooker and Sally Stone, who have published extensively in this area, actively position interior design along this line of thinking: 'One of the fundamental principles of Interior design is that the discipline is concerned with the understanding and the subsequent reuse of existing spaces. Objects and spaces are 'valued' for their *previous* meaning and retained or re-used in a space' and later in the text, 'interior architecture, interior design and building reuse are very closely linked subjects; all of them deal in varying degrees, with the transformation of a given space'.⁹

In their texts, Brooker and Stone consistently identify a set of principles or categories, akin to a curatorial taxonomy of the practice. In *Re-readings*, one of the first significant publications to position interior architecture/interior design practice, three main strategies are outlined: intervention, insertion and installation. (Interesting to note that each begins with the prefix '*in*'). Like a curated exhibition, various examples are selected to illustrate each category. With reference to Louis Kahn's question of a building 'What does it want to be?', the authors define 'the purpose of the book [is] to show that the unique answer is hidden within the profundity of the existing building'.¹⁰ Each strategy works within an existing building to make evident the 'inherent qualities of the place and its surroundings'. Positioned in this way, interior architecture, and by association interior design, becomes a practice concerned with recognizing inherent qualities and the interior, the site/sight of their re-presentation. This articulates a particular philosophical position regarding time and space, history and place. This is not critically reflected upon or positioned in their writing either as a particular theoretical framework or a set of tools that may or may not be useful in thinking about this practice. Instead the principles are offered up with a sense that they are intrinsic to the discipline.

Given the reference to installation in their taxonomy, together with the detailed discourse around issues of site specificity in both architecture and art over the last fifty years, it is surprising to find these topics are not actively and critically engaged with in the text. For example, Minon Kwon's seminal text *One Place After Another. Site Specific Art and Locational Identity* maps a history of site specific practice in contemporary art practice.¹¹ Since Minimalism, concepts of site specificity which essentialized existing conditions have been challenged. Yet there is no sense of this critique having any relevance to the practice of interior design despite the fact that artists such as Robert Morris and James Turrell are frequently referenced by interior design practitioners and students. In relation to the question of practice and occupation as working/employing, Kwon's book is particularly insightful in presenting different modes of working space, enfolding and involving site conditions, and mapping trajectories of practices across decades.

The concept of inherent qualities and essences – so often equated with the terms 'interior' and 'interiority' – have also been challenged, particularly in philosophy. The writings of Gilles Deleuze are particularly provocative in his dismissal of *the* interior as an isolated, independent entity. For Deleuze, one must not 'look to the internal or intrinsic 'meaning', 'structure' or 'life' of the terms involved (whether they be people, a person and an animal, elements in a biological system, and so on). ... organised beings are not the embodiment of an essence or idea, but are the result of enormous numbers of relations between parts which have no significance on their own. In other words, specific beings are produced from within a generalised milieu of exteriority without reference to any guiding interiority'.¹² Deleuze addresses the concept of 'in' not as an independent entity but as a relational condition. 'An interior is only a selected exterior. An exterior, a projected interior'.¹³ The process of interiorization becomes vital and produces, as Grosz puts it, 'a provisional ordering of chaos through the laying down of a grid or order that entraps chaotic shards, chaotic states, to arrest or slow them into a space and a time, a structure and a form where they can affect and be affected by bodies'.¹⁴

This kind of thinking is manifest in the positioning of interior design by Andrea Branzi, Italian designer and until 2009, chair of interior design at the Politecnico di Milano. In his observation of the changing urban environment and how retail has re-territorialized the city, Branzi aligns retail with urban, interior and exterior conditions enfolded. He claims that the city is 'no longer just a bunch of 'architectural boxes' ... having transformed itself into a territory of commodities, exchanges, information and services'.¹⁵ He goes on to say 'this observation represents a brand-new subject for the Interior Design culture and opens a new season of design experimentation and deeper inspection into the new frontiers of an urban reality ... No more as separated environmental realities, but rather as active elements of an *enzymatic territory*, always changing its function and form'.¹⁶ These ideas of 'always changing', catalysts, energies and forces suggest a different kind of interior thinking and practice from one which seeks to make present the 'profundity of existing building'.

Exhibition experiments / employments

Urban Interior Occupation is an ongoing project which engages the conjunction between urban and interior, exterior and interior, through a series of occupations. In September 2008, Urban Interior¹⁷ occupied the spaces of a craft gallery in Melbourne with various occupations of making and producing. Questioning/ignoring the conventional 10am to 5pm opening hours and white cube display of artefacts on plinths, Urban Interior took over the gallery space with performances, actions, changes, sound, smell, thoughts, image, discussions, presentations,

night and day; redistributing and enfolding outside and insides, individuals and collectives. The gallery became arranged through acts of crafting as distinct from craft artefacts, by process rather than outcomes; it became a space of work and space was worked. Over the duration of ten days, the gallery space as enclosure and site was tested, ignored and transformed through 'different ways of occupying, taking up, space-time'.¹⁸ Spatial and temporal conditions of the surrounding urban environment were activated, incorporated, selected, projected, recomposed and transformed. The interior in 'Urban Interior' can not be adequately defined with reference to spatial enclosure so much as a process of fabrication, of assemblage and arrangement – of a process of interiorization.

A similar approach became manifest in a subsequent exhibition with a different group of people. Titled *Advance / Retreat. Three experiments in transdisciplinary collaboration* the curators Brad Haylock and Mark Richardson invited three groups composed of designers and artists to explore potential limits or boundaries encountered through collaboration between disciplines.¹⁹ Each group was allocated a space in the gallery. The military nuances of advancing and retreating in the exhibition's title expressed the nature of occupation as both spatial and one of action. The occupation of the gallery by the different groups during the exhibition manifested different approaches to concepts of space and time. The difference between determining beforehand how to occupy the space of the gallery through an idea or a schemata (i.e. a design *for* occupation); and a way of working / mode of employing dynamic relations between practices, individuals and spaces became apparent. Our group inspired by Stella's concept of 'working space' investigated the potential of space as 'live, real, extendable and expandable' as a process of working and one which was not defined by the architectural enclosure.²⁰ Time and improvisation repositioned the question of occupation as a process of designing and occupying as distinct from negotiating constructed space evident in the other two spaces. *Working Space* experimented with practice where it was not known in advance what would happen and instead the attention was on working space over time.

Curatorial practices

This practice in exhibitions has engaged with both exhibition design and curatorial practice as sites of experimentation around questions of interior and interior design. The process of interiorization involves processes of framing, selecting, arranging – curatorial and exhibition processes which are also processes of interior design. As acts of occupation and working space, there are different kinds of relations, spatial and temporal conditions worked and hence ways of working and occupying. It is interesting to make a connection here with the curatorial approach of Brooker and Stone which categorizes and outlines a taxonomy of interior practices. There is a distinction however – in that their approach identifies a set of principles to establish a schema for the practice in advance of the doing. In *Rereading*, it is: intervention, insertion and installation. In a more recent paper titled *Spolia*, they reiterate this curatorial approach to the discipline and its discourse by presenting another set of categories in relation to methods and variations of the use of 'spolia' as a defining characteristic of interior design practice: 'Ready-mades, Persistent or Residual Meaning, Continuity and Permanence'.²¹

This kind of curatorial approach is consistent with their positioning of interior as a practice of working with existing space. Here a schema is given that attempts to identify and locate appropriate practices to both illustrate and re-present the discipline. Like the museum's endeavour to know butterflies by pinning them down and arranging according to different

taxonomies, this approach fixes the practice through a desire to know beforehand. This kind of curatorial approach as an occupation/employment has the potential to colonise in that it posits a curatorial frame of definition in advance of the doing. In exhibitions, this kind of curatorial approach tends to reduce art to an illustration and representation of an over-riding theme or idea.

Working Space experimented with curatorial practice where it was not known in advance what would happen and instead the focus was on working space over time. The curatorial practice here involved a series of instructions to a builder on the conceptual aspects of 'working space'. Three sets of instructions – one at the beginning of each week over the duration of the exhibition effected a change in circumstances which was then responded to by others involved. Space was worked and the gallery became working space. The relations in play were made manifest to those who encountered the room – through the changing dynamics over time.

This approach finds resonance with Irit Rogoff's positioning of the curatorial.

In a sense "the curatorial" is thought and critical thought that does not rush to embody itself, does not rush to concretise itself, but allows us to stay with the questions until they point us in some direction we might not have been able to predict. ... a move away from intention, away from illustration, away from exemplification – a move that does not go in the direction of furnishing good, or not so good, ideas with a rich set of instances.²²

Conclusion

The question of occupation is useful for thinking ideas along some trajectories emerging in relation to the practice and discourse of interior design. The opportunity to inflect the word 'occupation' between an idea of interior design *for* an occupation of space and as a mode of working highlights differences in processes of interiorization and poses the problematic of how concepts of interior are constructed, positioned and occupied. This paper has considered two trajectories: from a mode of working space which is about defining beforehand – the occupation of interior design as the practice of occupying space – and the kinds of negotiations that come with constructed space and spatial enclosures to an occupying which evolves through an employment of forces in the production of a temporal framing.

A refrain through this latter trajectory is one of composition and assemblage in the production of time-space. While difficult to explain, Deleuze's concept of 'haecceity' captures and expresses the potential of this trajectory – shifting from a focus on form to formation, highlighting movement with position and the temporal with space. To repeat a question posed by interior design academic, Mark Taylor: 'Could interior be thought of as haecceity?'²³ To end with Deleuze's words on haecceity as a way of picking up this trajectory and, in the process, open the potential for reconceptualising interiors as provisional compositions employing/enfolding temporal and spatial relations.

... You are longitude and latitude, a set of speeds and slownesses between unformed particles, a set of nonsubjectified affects. You have the individuality of a day, a season, a year, a life (regardless of its duration) – a climate, a wind, a fog, a swarm, a pack (regardless of its regularity). ... It should not be thought that a haecceity consists simply of a decor or backdrop that situates subjects, or of appendages that hold things and people to the ground. It is the entire assemblage in its individuated aggregate that is a haecceity; it is this assemblage that is defined by a longitude and

*a latitude, by speeds and affects, independently of forms and subjects, which belong to another plane. ... cease to be subjects to become events, in assemblages that are inseparable from an hour, a season, an atmosphere, an air, a life. ... Spatiotemporal relations, determinations, are not predicates of the thing but dimensions of multiplicities.*²⁴

Endnotes

¹ Stella, F. (1986) *Working Space*, p. 5.

² Stella, F. (1986) *Working Space*, p. 6.

³ Stella, F. (1986) *Working Space*, p. 35.

⁴ *Urban Interior Occupation*, Craft Victoria, Melbourne, September 2008. *Advance/Retreat. Three experiments in transdisciplinary collaboration*, West Space, Melbourne, November 2008

⁵ Brooker, G. & S, Stone, (2004) *Re-readings – interior architecture and the design principles of remodelling existing buildings*, p. 19.

⁶ Brooker, G. and S. Stone, (2008) *Spolia*, not paginated.

⁷ Grosz, E. (2008) *Chaos, Territory, Art. Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth*, pp. 11-12.

⁸ This cited text by Grosz – from chapter 1 of *Chaos, Territory, Art. Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* – was initially presented by Grosz as the keynote lecture for the IDEA (Interior Design/Interior Architecture Educators Association) symposium in Melbourne, April 2005. This symposium, convened by Gini Lee and myself, brought the disciplines of interior design and landscape architecture together to see what might emerge.

⁹ Brooker, G. and S. Stone, (2008) *Spolia*, not paginated. Italics are mine.

¹⁰ Brooker, G. & S, Stone, (2004) *Re-readings – interior architecture and the design principles of remodelling existing buildings*, p. 9.

¹¹ See Kwon, M. (2002) *One Place After Another. Site Specific Art and Locational Identity*. Claire Doherty (2007) in *Curating Wrong Places ... or Where Have All the Penguins Gone?* describes Kwon's book as 'One of the most useful and cogently argued new theorisations of place ... critiquing the essentializing of site'. p. 104. Its continuing relevancy and usefulness across disciplines is exemplified by its inclusion as a key text for a close reading session chaired by Professor Jane Rendell, Director of Architectural Research, Bartlett and keynote speaker at the *One Day Sculpture* symposium in Wellington 26-28 March 2009.

¹² Roffe, J. 'Exteriority / Interiority' in Parr, A. (ed) (2005) *The Deleuze Dictionary*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, p. 95.

¹³ Deleuze, G. (1988) *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, p. 125.

¹⁴ Grosz, E. (2008) *Chaos, Territory, Art. Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth*, p. 13.

¹⁵ Branzi, A. (2008) *Retailing in the globalisation era*, p. 94.

¹⁶ Branzi, A. (2008) *Retailing in the globalisation era*, p. 96.

¹⁷ Urban Interior is a research unit based in the School of Architecture and Design at RMIT University. It is composed of people from a range of disciplines including fashion, sound, interior design, architecture, industrial design and art. As a collective, individual research trajectories cover a breadth of practices, scales and concerns from bodies to events within the public urban realm. See www.urbaninterior.net

¹⁸ Deleuze, G. in conversation with Negri, T. 'Control and Becoming' in *Negotiations 1972–1990*, p.172.

¹⁹ The exhibition was held at West Space, an artist led initiative in Melbourne, November 2008.

²⁰ Working Space group was composed of artists Inverted Topology (Masato Takasaka, Danny Lacy and Justin Andrews), builder Brian Scales, graphic designer Warren Taylor, and me – curator/interior designer.

²¹ Brooker, G. and S. Stone, (2008) *Spolia*, not paginated.

²² Rogoff, I. (2006) *Smuggling – a curatorial model*, p. 132.

²³ Taylor, M, (2001) *architecture +interior. a roam of one's own*, p. 17.

²⁴ Deleuze, G. & F. Guattari, (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, pp. 262–263.

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