

Reading Room / Writing Room: Interior Design As Critical Commentary

Mark Taylor

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Introduction

This paper discusses a final year course in which students are invited to consider design through reading, writing and making. It has two main goals, which are research and critical reflection. During the course students research a number of words/concepts closely associated with architectural design, to determine their breadth and meanings as they are used in other disciplines such as medicine, philosophy, women's studies and literature. The chosen words particularly focus on the notion/act of adding-to, embellishing, or inserting into/onto existing conditions. Since the words are researched through disciplines other than interior and architecture, new meanings or interpretations can be used to formulate architectural propositions about space, surface and so on, thus extending our knowledge and understanding of design.

A design project runs parallel to the research and writing. Sited in an institutional organisation, the School of Architecture Library, the project critiques the way this type of architecture promotes universal values above individuality and difference. For the project the library, as an institutional instrument and existing interior space, is examined and critiqued from several perspectives including feminist, gender, culture, authority, and architectural. The purpose is to draw-out ways in which the library is perceived, understood and engaged with, from these different perspectives, and transposes these into propositions about library, architecture and the interior that accommodate individuality and difference. It is not a matter of redesigning for changing institutional needs, but the institution as a body, and physical manifestation is critiqued and reflected upon in relation to identity and changing cultural values.

Design proposals are brought into the library via the words/concepts already researched, as a process of adding-to, embellishing, or inserting into/onto a set of existing conditions. Their purpose is not to replace the existing library but to act as critical commentary and to this extent may be relatively small. The words/concepts and course readings for these assignments deal with aspects of adding-to an existing body through such things as surface marking, implanting, grafting and patching, and discuss how such aspects can be regarded as legitimate and of value. There are several key texts on bodies, surface and marking that are used to facilitate discussion beyond conventional interior discourse, for example Elizabeth Grosz's text on 'The Body as Inscriptive Surface' figures prominently. These texts offer insights into such things as alienation, spatial adornment and humility in an effort to rethink the interior.¹

Seminars were used to discuss various texts, and explore ways that the interior affects and is affected by people and situations. To assist this and further remove the 'object' nature of architecture, the interior was discussed as a system of representation that is constructed, experienced and understood, rather than through formal 'architectonic' terms. It is also experienced through such things as drawing, photography and literature, and includes construction and design invention. At its margins are such things as gender and spatial privileging. In this exchange we find issues such as gender and sexuality being explored, with intent to determine how patriarchy and the question of gender and sexuality have been inscribed within architectural space.²

Rooms were considered and re-positioned by addressing existing matter, spatial and

organisational conditions in a critical manner. Both a Marxist and feminist reading of a room offered a different perspective to both the physical space, and associated cultural, political, societal and functional aspects of its meaning and arrangement. A similar exercise from a black, lesbian, gay, feminine, and Maori perspective also sought to modify the space via critical commentary. Accordingly the need to modify is made in relation to an imposed institutional understanding of spatial occupation, arrangement and encounter, rather than by changing use or function. To some extent it is subtle, internal or internalised almost subversive act of reinterpretation and design.

Course Content(ious)

The course includes one inter-year assignment, one written assignment and one studio-based assignment. The written and studio assignments have a close relationship, one that seeks debate on the interior, in an open, edifying manner. Both these assignments are run in parallel, the intention being to generate an informative process between research and design, whilst providing more space/raum/room for reading and thinking. Two staff members were involved with each assignment.

Assignment 1 Place Maps

A vertically integrated group/individual assignment that provides a venue for *seemingly* peripheral discussion that engages the debate surrounding the interior. Its intention is to broaden an awareness of the marks and traces we construct and leave behind, when engaging interiors. Each group is to visit *Te Papa/Our Place*, (National Museum of New Zealand/Aotearoa) with a view to map/record our place. Duration 2 weeks.

Assignment 2 Writing Roam

This assignment provides a platform for widening horizons through roaming text and engaging in unfamiliar conversations. As an investigative process it allows for critically evaluating words and concepts often employed in design and architecture, by researching their meanings and use in other disciplines. It calls for writing on a surface, perhaps as a small 'book', or series of markings, on one of the given or approved words/concepts. A minimum of two students will be assigned to each 'word/concept' on the list to enable wider research and livelier discussion.

For this assignment 'design' is not seen as 'subject centred' but part of a wider, more loose series of interconnections, emerging as a peripheral activity in other disciplines. It encourages a move beyond the design disciplinary matrix, in an effort to engage the conversation of others and finding new ways of *seeing something* and *saying something*. In such a move there is an engagement with the unfamiliar, and researching in unfamiliar 'languages' such as, philosophy, gender studies, sociology, critical and cultural theory, literary criticism, psychology, medicine, cosmetics, dentistry, beauty therapy, sewing, gardening and furniture repair. However, though some texts in these areas are written in difficult or unfamiliar language engaging with the 'jargon' is necessary for taking part and keeping the conversation alive. In all cases the 'word / concept' must be connected back to a rethinking of the interior, though the degree to which this is done is open. Duration 7 weeks at 1 session per week.

The following group of words/concepts are chosen because of they are concerned with marking an existing body, and many have close associations with the decorative/craft aspects of interior design:

Surface Marking, Bruise, Inscription, Decoration, Tattoo, Ornament, Adornment, Embellishment, Embroider, Patch, Replication, Appliqué, Implant, Tuck, Insertion, Graft, Root, Fold, Rhizome, Palimpsest, Gloss, Inscription...

Submission requirements:

Verbal and visual seminar presentation of research
Written submission of 1500-2000 words - open format

Assignment 3 Reading Room

This assignment questions interior spaces that deny the familiar and social aspects of a place and the individual, for the sake of highlighting universality and rational organisation. One such space is the institutional library which can be 'read' as an abstract space for occupation, determined by a utilitarian, universal ordering and governance, over the individual. For example, it provides one arrangement for reading and study, namely hard surface table and chair; it provides controlled 'economic' book shelving, with little space for browsing and lounging; it has gendered spatial and material hierarchies.

The project title *Reading Room* indicates that one is free to offer a reading of 'room' and/or 'the room', as well as respond to the act of 'reading' and/or a 'reading space (raum)'. In all cases the reading must be made in relation to the self. Using any theories, criticisms and other texts students construct a critical position, prior-to and alongside their design proposal. The proposal provides a parallel position and adds to the complexity of the library. It should draw upon the readings and research undertaken in Assignment 1 - *Writing Room*.

There is no programme or brief in the conventional sense, but students are invited to respond to physical and social/psychological concerns using their design skills in order to orchestrate the space in relation to the action, processes or outcomes of 'reading'. As such it reduces programmatic issues down to a minimum while elevating more tectonic and theoretical considerations. Large scale modelling is essential, for it allows the complexities of a seemingly simple proposal to be fully explored and developed in relation to idea and physical location. Duration 8 weeks at 1 session per week plus 2 weeks model building.

Submission requirements

Presentation drawings at an appropriate scale such as 1:20, 1:5 or 1:1. Models should be large scale either 1:20 or 1:5, or a full size mock-up in the library.

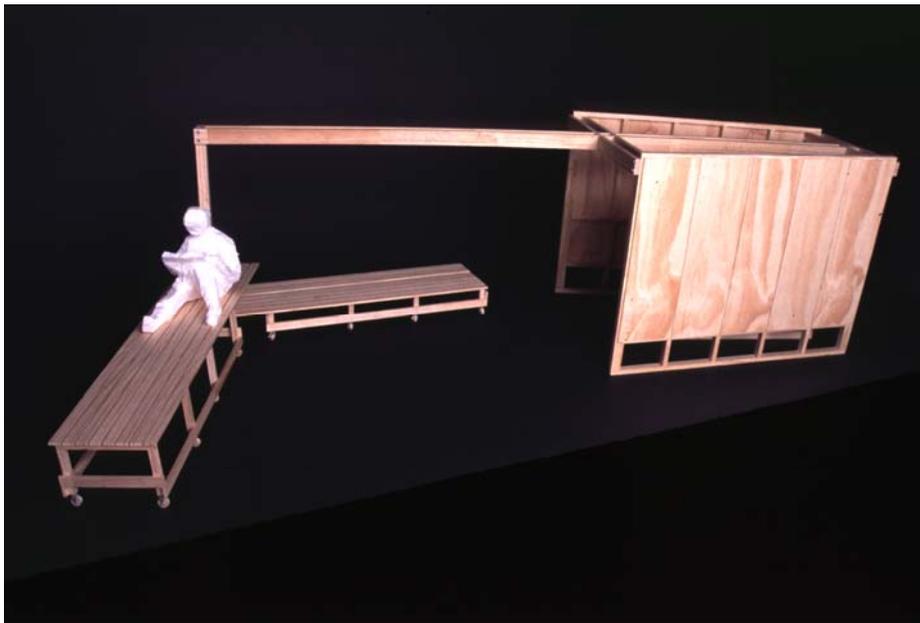
Remaking and Remarking



Katrina Rivers, Home Invasion³
(Full size installation by Katrina Rivers)

This work critically challenges our preconceptions of an institutionalised interior by

introducing domestic familiarity into a situation in which the interior architecture is read as having masculine traits. In referring to such things as the Cult of Domesticity, the domestic interior as a site of women's occupation and fabrication, is re-placed into a male-centred environment. Whether regarded as dressing-up or cross-dressing, this work transforms the space, by overlaying or overwriting as exemplified in a palimpsestic process (as researched for assignment 2). However, its location, a threshold is important, since it is the point of change, the place where one moves from one state to another. Every visitor entering and leaving engages with the work and subsequently is confronted with/by issues of gender and architecture/interior. When the large-scale curtain draws back to reveal the existing door as Jacobean lead-light window, it reflects a 'comfortable-home' image popular amongst home developers. But, the misaligned 'lead work' throws a challenge to convention and certainty.



*Ann Clements, Reading Space
(1:5 model by Amy Anderson, Juliet Cooke, Bihua Fu, Karen Henning-Hansen)*

Initiated by researching what constitutes 'reading', and how, and where it occurs both traditionally and contemporarily, this proposal questions and rethinks the whole library through the actions and circumstances of reading. In response to differing cultural perspectives on reading, it proposes that reading could be thought of as not a singular, isolated, and quiet experience, but as a multiplicitous activity including oral traditions and public shared debate. Formal organisation comes under scrutiny as the work sets-up an 'accidental' relationship with the library, that is, it appears as an ambiguous fragment of other occasions such as park bench, changing room, school hall and garden shed. Though the design initially worked with the idea of embellishment, (as researched in assignment 2), the final proposal moved beyond the existing furniture to introduce its own. The final proposal has an informal almost sculptural (in an artistic sense) quality. Drawing heavily on ideas of humility and ambiguity, it presents a series of disturbing (un)comfortable places to read, silently and aloud, to oneself or a gathering, within or without the enclosure.⁴

Conclusion

Although the project appears complex and to some extent seems to 'direct' the student work, the project outcomes exhibit a wide range of responses. They are different not only as a result of individual taste and preference, but also as a result of the numerous combinations of words/concepts and individual interpretations. This factor is important for it provides open

thinking, encouraging students to question theory and practise in relation to their own work. Although their initial reaction was cause for concern, the students met the assignments with enthusiasm, perhaps due to an identification with the library as a familiar place for study. In attempting to bring an individuality into the research, many began by thinking of their personal preferences for a reading space, rather than critically reading the existing room. Many students were less inclined to sit and read in the library at a desk and on a table, preferring to read in other spaces. These included the bath, bed and backyard, indicating a need to be surrounded by familiar, softer form of architecture/interior, which was often brought into their work through fabrics and other woven materials.

What the project indicates is that interior design can take a critical position on an existing room and the institution of room, both through analyses and design. By making slight changes architecture becomes the site for political action. Each differing perspective exposes how the existing space conforms to a global ideology on disposition and arrangement, supported by a modernist architectural ideology. The fact that it prescribes one arrangement for reading and study, namely open plan hard surface table and upright chairs, precludes other culturally based forms of study. By reading the library in this manner, and offering another perspective through an architectural proposition, the existing library's stasis is brought into question.

Footnotes

1. Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism*, Allen and Unwin., St. Leonards, (1994), pp 138-159.
2. Beatriz Colomina, (ed.), *Sexuality and Space*, Princeton Architectural Press, Princeton, (1992).
3. This project received an award from *Object* magazine, '99 Object Magazine Awards, *Object*, Centre for Contemporary Craft, Sydney, Issue 1, (2000) pp.68-69.
4. This work drew upon the thoughts and ideas of Siah Armanjani see: Siah Armajani, *Reading Spaces*, *Libres de Recerca*, 1, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, (1995).