



Issue 03: Essay



Interior Environments: The Space of Interiority

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Although taken for granted, the body is always intertwined with space. Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote that space is existential and that existence is spatial. Human being is therefore fundamentally related to space. According to Merleau-Ponty, the body and mind inhabit space and by doing so we construct a meaning of space.¹ Consequently when we architecturally express space, we create a realisation of the thought of space. Equally, interiors are shaped by inner thoughts, dreams and memory – our interiority and inner life. But these interiors are also shaped by external images that dominate our thought. Many interior spaces are in fact shaped by exterior forces, such as desires triggered by imagery unconsciously lodged in our minds. These images reduce or break the line between the interior and the exterior. When we create interiors we express a collection of desires and reflections that live within us, and we express them in a material sense. It is important for interior designers to be able to go beyond thinking of interiors as just physical space. For the profession to develop beyond service provision – most often towards 'sustaining the unsustainable' – designers need to develop an understanding of the multi-layered complexity of interiority and its relation to lived space. This paper introduces some of these complexities by bringing together the idea of interiority with theorisations of space (with reference to Foucault and Lefebvre).

On interiority

The term interiority is used across many disciplines including psychology, literature, philosophy and architecture. Thus, interiority cannot be defined simply in terms of the colour, texture, dimension or materials employed in an interior. Interiority, unlike 'interior' is defined on the grounds of abstract presence rather than a relative location, and it moves between all boundaries and across terrain.² It is connected to, but is not the same as, the physical interior. Christine McCarthy concludes that as a theory and design methodology, interiority is an unstable and evolving notion and its definition will always depend on the future tense.³ Interior design is still in the process of comprehending its capacity and significance.

One definition of interiority refers to the control put in place to limit the accessibility of an item or a place. In other words, it is that abstract quality that brings about the definition and recognition of an interior, or the set of variables and coincidences that are theoretical but immaterial, which bring the possibility for the formation of the interior.⁴ However, this definition is not absolute, and interiority does not only depend on architectural restrictiveness. Interiority is not static but mobile; in a sense, it is a fusion of physical space and the psychological interiority which occupies the mind.

Interiority is an intangible concept, seemingly inaccessible and abstract, yet its essence makes our experience of a place something familiar and meaningful. It is the binary of the intangible images we carry in our minds and the experience of a physical place that contributes to the sense of place of an interior. In interior design, interiority is sometimes referred to as giving a space personality or its own identity. This, according to Charles Rice, can be achieved by interrelating the building envelope and its interior elements, such as furniture, finishes, the use of colour, light, movement, spatial elements and so on.⁵ The works of Mackintosh, Le Corbusier, Aalto, Loos and others have been described as having such a relation, by merging the building envelope with its interior content, thus inviting the inhabitant to experience and live the architectural space. Today, architects and interior designers would say that economic factors prevent them from engaging in such detailed spatial engagement. And so they take a more practical approach; architects provide a shell and the interior designer designs the fit-out for it. Such a process of

disconnection prevents any meaningful dialogue between interior designer and architect, and undermines the ability to actualise a space to provide meaningful experience for its occupants.

Boundaries define inclusion and exclusion and thereby define interiority. Boundaries can also categorise and stereotype – an example is the 'members only' club,⁶ the boundary being the regulation of the interior space of occupants. This however, is not exclusively an inside location - as an inside sustains exteriority as mentioned previously. Unlike inside and outside - which have clear boundaries - interiority and exteriority are interwoven within architectural built constraints; but are not defined by the boundaries of buildings, and are at times found within them and at other times found outside of those constraints. Because they are fluid, the experience of inside-ness can be present or absent from where one is physically present.

Interiority is also a concept that relies upon cultural, social, technological and physical development in our society. A telephone is an example of technological design directly involved in interiority, as it connects an individual to memory, making one place feel like another in a powerful way. An example of this is an individual discussing work over the phone, while situated in a hotel; at that moment, her mind is carried away to the interior space of the office and her inner self connects with the interiority of the office.

Though complex, interiority is part of everyday experience, carrying with it the original etymology of habit and thought. As such, interiority is fundamental to our integrity as autonomous human beings. This originality means that interiority will always have a personal meaning and will be subject to transformation. We each experience events differently and assemble them in a meaningful way for ourselves. We will always engage with our own interior dimensions privately and formulate a way of making sense of them. This forms part of our individual identities.

The Theory of Space

Ways in which architectural theory has theorised space are relevant to understanding interiority, though as argued earlier, interiority is not just a spatial concept. 'Of Other Spaces' (also known as 'Heterotopia'), was a lecture given to architects in 1967 by Michael Foucault, in which he focused on places which have a strange connection to other places.⁷ Foucault names these other places 'heterotopias', places that are neither here nor there, and are simultaneously physical and mental.⁸ A heterotopia can be described as a real space that stands outside of accepted space. Foucault lists several examples: the moment when seeing oneself in a mirror; or being in a garden; or on a boat. All these examples unite spaces that are not usually together into one single space. A mirror makes reference to a reflection of the self which is not real, but at the same time the mirror as a real object reflects an image one relates to. A garden is a real place that juxtaposes several other places, a constructed environment featuring plants from around the world. Foucault describes a boat as the ultimate heterotopia, for while it is a physical object and contains physical space, it floats and is a place without a place.⁹

To fully understand heterotopia, one cannot view it in isolation from Foucault's other projects – on discipline, ethics, ideology and identity. While heterotopia has been of interest to writers, academics, artists and others, in architectural theory, the concept of heterotopia is more about a method of using space as a tool of analysis.¹⁰ Heterotopian space has more than one layer of meaning. These layers can have a small, or a large, effect on a space. For example a traditional cemetery placed in the centre of the city adjacent to the church, as opposed to a modern cemetery situated outside a town; here the space context has changed because the context of culture changed.¹¹ Another example is a large, flat screen television in a living room. This heterotopian space is able to juxtapose - in a single real space (the living room) - several spaces, places and events in a single moment. Foucault describes heterotopias as spaces which are constructed by mind, but equally have a physical presence and act as other spaces alongside existing spaces. Utopias, in contrast are places of the imagination. Foucault argues that heterotopias are part of every culture but are expressed differently depending on time and place. The link between a heterotopia and time, as Foucault explains, can be very powerful. A heterotopia disconnects us from our traditional time. He gives the example of a library or a museum, a real space filled with items from different times.

Another influential theorist on understanding space is French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, particularly his work, 'The Production of Space'. Lefebvre's idea is that space is a social product.¹² His theory offers new ways of understanding processes of urbanisation, their conditions and consequences of social reality. Lefebvre made a clear distinction between architectural space and the space of architects. While architectural space produces social space through experiences, the space of architects is space manipulated and affected by architects as part of their professional practice.¹³ Lefebvre claims that a space that an architect encounters is not neutral but has already been produced. He calls that space abstract space, a space that separates mental space from lived space which he claims separates us from the experience of everyday life. In his view architects are particularly guilty of this by continually designing and constructing empty containers into which people and habits will be introduced.¹⁴

The concepts discussed have with no doubt profoundly influenced how urban and architectural space is understood theoretically, however, this seems to be disconnected from the practice of architecture. While focusing so intently on

perfecting the skills associated with creating environments, how we dwell in them often gets forgotten. As such, space needs to be rethought, not purely as physical containment, but as a relationship that exists between body, mind and space. Interior designers need to employ an understanding of design and planning that is inclusive of the notion of place-making and dwelling - as interior environments can have a profound influence on how we conduct ourselves.

Our association and identity is based on the environment we put ourselves into, and inherently this also determines our social status and lifestyle. It is often said that the experience of architecture is based on the space, the relations with spatial, and the interlocking plays between voids. However if space was the main interest in architecture, there would have been no need for construction. What is necessary to capture, is that the essence of architecture is not space enclosed as a purely practical solution; but that architecture must be the product of its interpretation of influences over time, life experience and the many daily activities of its occupants - sleeping, eating, conversation, working, playing and interactions.¹⁵ It is the act of dwelling that gives space meaning. The architect or designer must understand that the essential aspect of creating space is to create spaces that affirm our sense of dwelling. On a concrete level this can be achieved by the way in which space is arranged in a meaningful way, through limiting it with use of materials, or the obstruction of the vision perimeter. This is often achieved by use of ornaments, objects, light and shade, texture and structure moulding, blurring the building skin and the interior objects within.

Linking space and mind

Apart from interior spaces being inhabited, they also inhabit each individual living in them. This happens when an individual constructs his/her inner self within the house he/she lives in and essentially, the inner self identifies with the home. The individual's consciousness absorbs the house he/she lives in and identifies itself with the place. Metaphorically, the individual's inner self completely identifies itself with the interior of the house, and their psyche claims the space when the person moves away from the surrogate house interior.¹⁶ Our inner being has direct but very complex links to the places we live and the places we work in, and these influence the levels of our perception and action limits. These relations interplay between the interior, interiority and the exterior. This may be evidenced in a case of human experience wherein one's emotions react to the environment.

These reactions are always linked with the space, the object, the image and reflection. Individuals usually engage themselves with the surrounding environment including the natural things around them, materials and other human beings, which are all on the outside of ourselves. This engagement makes people view themselves in a fundamentally 'inner' way. People are able to consider themselves as subjects and distinguish themselves from objects, by concentrating on their inner selves - and this presence of self is interiority. Thus, humans experience the interior space as the relationships between interiority and exteriority, the physical and contextual feeling of being in a space, and the perception and feelings within the mind.¹⁷

Conclusion

A discussion of interior, interiority and space provides a significant challenge as these words carry different meanings, conceptualisations and usages. Many discourses and disciplines make use of these terminologies outside of the built environment. The concept of space is particularly challenging to comprehend, as a result of the philosophical concept being confused with the physical experience. As argued, it is something concrete, while simultaneously it is a mental construction. Thinkers such as Lefebvre and Foucault attempted to clarify this, but past and current architectural and design theory provides an underdeveloped engagement with their complexity, and offers little clarification for design scholars who want to comprehensively understand and express space.

Despite space depending on its definition and its historical context, it is still common for architects to see space simply as a matter of enclosure. While the connectedness of space and interiority remains a constant but obscure reality, Lefebvre's theory of the relationship between the space produced by thought, and the space within which thought occurs, offers some valuable insights. Designing space is not simply designing enclosures. The function of interior design is to make a connection of the physicality and materiality of a space, and the body and mind of the people occupying it. In creating a place, the designer can only facilitate - by generating a platform for the occupants to produce their own interior environments through lived experiences, external forces such as imagery and social constructions. This means that although the designer's own interiority can never be absent from the designed space, it is the events that take place in that space over time that truly produce the space.

Interior designers can have a major influence on how a space is perceived and experienced by its users. They are trained to maximise creativity without losing sensitivity for the people they design for. Interior designers are experts in choosing the right construction methods, materials and finishes to create the desired outcome without compromising budget or building regulations. They can create dynamic environments which maximise productivity for a company, and are experts in labelling activities to include and exclude social interaction. An example is the design of a school where the designer has a direct influence on the zoning of the space which creates the conditioning of certain behaviour. For instance, the placement and number of computer labs in the school

environment resembles an artificial office environment. The layout, furniture, lighting and air quality all mimic the modern office, where students are taught to perform in an appropriate way, ensuring a direct transition into the working world. A school is full of modern heterotopias through conditioning and behaviour; where artificial spaces are created such as canteens, break-out spaces, social interaction pods and so on. These are all spaces identified by governments and authorities to benefit our contemporary society - to be conditioned and structured in a particular way. Unaware, interior designers are employed to make the spaces that structure social behaviour.

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