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## Urban Interior: interior-making in the urban environment.

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**Abstract** — Engaging interior design with questions of urbanism opens up new ways of thinking about how to address the increasing density occurring within cities globally. It is an often cited fact that for the first time in history there are more people living in cities than rural areas. This is expected to continue to increase, transforming cities and people's lives. It is said that the twenty-first century will be known as the century of the city (Tibaijuka 2010).

While interior design and urbanism may seem an unlikely connection, the idea of positioning interior design as a practice engaging with an outside as distinct from addressing the inside of a building finds connections historically and theoretically. This requires a different way of grasping the discipline of interior design from one which assumes it as a spatial discipline which happens inside built form. While ideas of the occupation of empty spaces within the built environment as urban rooms are immediate examples, there are also other potentials especially in the movement away from thinking about interior design as taking place in three-dimensional space. This paper moves to consider interior design as a spatial and temporal practice where the temporal/time is the dynamic context within which interior design practice is situated and involves a process of interior-making in relation to these forces. As an emerging practice through the twentieth century, interior design has been shaped by the forces of contemporary technologies which have challenged and transformed relations between inside and outside, interior and exterior, both spatially and temporally.

Concepts of interior and interiority are encountered in contemporary critiques of the modern city. The writings of Mark Pimlott focus on the 'interiorised territory' of mega shopping malls and other urban developments where there is only within: 'the antagonistic exterior disappears; one is in a potentially endless environment that offers perpetual itinerancy and an illusion of freedom from which there is no escape' (Pimlott 2010: 46). This makes one think of the fully functioning ski slope located inside a mall situated in the desert (Emirates Mall, Dubai) and the 24-7 city where there is no night as the lights are never turned off. Pimlott and others point to the increasing individualism that pervades contemporary societies and shapes urban fabrics. *Intimate Metropolis* is the title of a collection of essays on the modern city where the 'choice of the word "intimate" reinforces the extent to which the

modern city is predicated on the concept of the private individual, and on the sanctity of the individuals; inmost thoughts and feelings' (di Palma et al. 2009: 1). Interior designers are well placed to critically address the process of interiorization and conditions of interiority and individualism. Interior design as a practice addresses the relation between people and their surroundings/environment specifically as one of inhabitation which addresses both physical and mental conditions.

This paper will consider what this positioning of interior design will bring to the question of urbanism through an attention to not only spatial planning but also temporal, social and aesthetic concerns. These ideas have been explored and investigated within a university interior design program working with undergraduate and postgraduate students to test these ideas through design research and scenario-based propositions. Research *through* design: through different scenarios, propositions and speculations which enable one to think 'what if?'; through design studios, exhibitions and projects. This approach is critical to design as a practice positioned as an agent of change and transformation. The outcomes from an undergraduate design studio called *Urban Rooms* which tested different kinds of theoretical approaches to thinking about interior-making; a Masters by Research project which collected and analysed street vendors in Singapore and Taipei in relation to interior design techniques; and projects by a research group called Urban Interior will be presented.

This paper will open up the potential of interior design as a critical urban practice for the twenty-first century, 'the century of the city'.

**Keywords:** interior design, interior-making, temporal, urban environment, research *through* design.

### INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses interior design in relation to the urban environment and poses the potential of urban interior as an interior design practice, as an interior-making in the urban environment. It will make reference to precedents where urban and interior have come together and introduce new ways of thinking about 'interior design' as a practice of designing interiors which shift from current dominant modes which equate it with a practice inside three dimensional space. As an emerging practice through the twentieth century, interior design has been shaped by the forces of contemporary technologies which have challenged

and transformed relations between inside and outside, interior and exterior, both spatially and temporally. The question of interior-making in the urban environment was posed as an area of investigation and experiment, research through design, in an undergraduate interior design studio and postgraduate research.

## URBAN + INTERIOR

While interior design and urbanism may seem an unlikely conjunction, there are historical precedents for understanding the urban environment as an interior. For example the inversion of the built environment where exteriors become interiors such as squares and streets; enclosed spaces produced by the built environment. The concept of the urban room is encountered in the architect Louis Kahn's drawings of 'the street is a room' and the nineteenth-century urban planner Camillo Sitte's propositions regarding urban arrangement according to artistic principles where he advocates city planning as an art of encounter and enclosure. In these examples, architecture and structure, facades and walls are elements which define interior spaces. While an inversion of the inside to outside, the architectural fabric/urban fabric continues to be understood as the primary act of enclosure.

This is an extension of the dominant idea of interior design as a practice concerned with the inside of buildings. For example, *The History of Interior Design*, now in its sixth edition, states: 'Interiors are an integral part of the structures that contain them – usually buildings. This means that interior design is inextricably linked to architecture and can only be studied within an architectural context' (Pile 2009: 11).

The conjunction of urban and interior opens 'interior' to the question of the outside as a creative problematic. It unsettles equations of interior design as a practice only of an architectural context by posing an urban context as potential. The term 'interior' becomes intensified as a creative problematic – how to make interiors *in relation* to an outside? And in an outside which is not enclosing but is undefinable, dynamic, contingent, changing, in flux – such as cities.

This re-functionalises the concept of interior from that which is already inside something (as with interior decoration and interior architecture) to the question of actual making interior and highlights the process of interiorising as a relational condition with an outside. The role of interior design here becomes a creative proposition for the designing of interiors as an interior-making and one which invites invention each time.

Interior design as a practice addresses the relation between people and their surroundings/environment specifically as one of inhabitation and one which addresses physical inhabitation – making spaces – and mental inhabitation – psychological, experiential, subjective; interior making as a practice which

produces blocks of space-time that enables inhabitation, physically and mentally, for living.

## URBAN INTERIOR DESIGNS

Following is a series of projects selected from design research which has been conducted at RMIT University through undergraduate design studios and postgraduate research addressing the conjunction urban and interior – posing the question 'what if?' to enable different scenarios, experimentations, propositions and speculations to be made. This kind of approach is valuable and critical to design as a practice positioned not only as a problem solving activity but also as an agent of change and transformation.

The idea of the urban room was the focus of a design studio offered to second and third year undergraduate interior design students in 2009. Titled *Urban Room*, the studio brief addressed the idea of the design of interiors as a process of interior-making shaped by intensities and forces, spatial and temporal conditions within the urban environment. The first part of the studio focused on developing strategies and techniques for interior-making within urban situations. Two distinct strategies were engaged with as a provocation for thinking about how one might conceive of and design an interior – mould and crystallization (Simondon, 1992; Deleuze, 2001)

The first strategy addressed issues of site specificity and existing conditions where the urban fabric informed and shaped the urban condition as an interior one – like a mould, a space with walls. The *1748 Map of Rome* by Giambattista Nolli and Sitte's theories in the *City Planning According to Artistic Principles* (1889) were references here – where the built urban fabric is seen as a spatial assemblage of enclosures and openings rather than buildings as objects in void space. Hence the square, forum and agora become spaces which can be inhabited and re-programmed as interiors. The architectural definition of interior is implicit with the articulation of inside and outside by walls – albeit the outside wall of a building now becomes the interior wall of an urban habitation.

A undergraduate design studio titled *Interior room: Urban room* offered at Portsmouth University in the United Kingdom was another reference in relation to the mould strategy. (Farrelly & Mitchell, 2008) The design brief for this studio was quite different to our approach in its focus on the idea of a room as an interior rather than the concept of interior and the question of interior-making which addressed through our studio. The design brief brought 'together two different realms: the interior and the urban and uses the "room" as a common language or framework'. This approach positioned interior design as a site-specific practice which involves responding 'to a given context, a site, a building, and a room'. The urban context is approached like the inside of

architecture, the urban fabric becomes a given context; mould-like.

The crystallization strategy, the second strategy we posed in the studio, was one which worked from a situation rather than a site. Starting from the middle rather than boundary conditions, this involved working rhizome-like making interiors through relations and connections as distinct from using pre-existing structures to enclose an internal space. The motif of crystallization was a reference to the idea of beginning from the middle where atmosphere, time, temperature, movement become active in the process. Here the process of interior-making is one of individuation in the midst of a confluence of forces, change and movement. This strategy amplifies the temporal as well as spatial conditions in the composition of interior conditions; a process of *modulation* as distinct from a mould. These two strategies – as a way of addressing interior-making – were tested through four situation scenarios: place-making, in-between spaces, situationist and intensification. The city became a laboratory for observation, testing and experimentation.

The second stage of the *Urban Room* studio invited the students to design an urban room situated on |along| within the ‘civic spine’ of the city of Melbourne which runs from one side of the city to the other. As part of the initial development of this proposition, each student was asked to conduct a situation analysis. The word ‘situation’ was used specifically to shift the focus from the built fabric of the city. The situation analysis included observation, analysis and documentation of: public and private space; lighting and light conditions, shadows; materials and immateriality; movements and flows, densities of circulation and stillness; behaviour; sound; historical layering; urban/city character; programs and activities such as eating, sleeping, meeting, selling, performing, shopping, public intimacies; seasons and weather; 24 hours and 7 days.

Students were asked to produce interior plans from their observations; plans which did not rely on the built fabric to define the condition of interior as interior/exterior boundaries. Alice Kohler’s interior plan is a good example – she maps forces and movement where confluences of forces produce densities and intensifications as interiorizations – like eddies in a stream. (Figure 1)

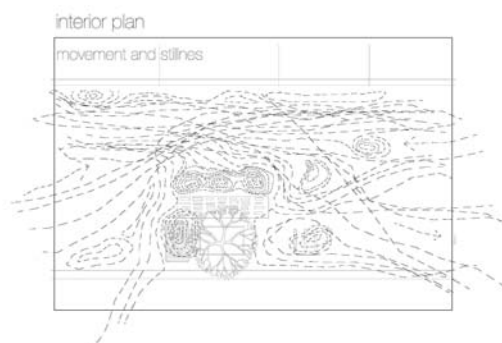


Figure 1. Alice Kohler *Interior Plan, Movement and Stillness* 2009. Drawings from *Design Strategy 2* in response to the RMIT *Urban Room* design studio.

Her observations of a street vendor selling photographs and the use of chalk lines to make an interior through relations with movement and stillness are captured below (Figures 2 & 3)



Figure 2. Alice Kohler *Photograph of street vendor*



Figure 3. Alice Kohler *Interior Plan, Street Vendor*

The students were asked to develop a proposition for an urban room which was able to accommodate more than one person, i.e. the urban room was not to be a one-to-one encounter but a space-time composition that engaged with a public. While the scale of the proposition was not specified, the fact that these propositions were emanating from an interior-thinking was manifested in the particular qualities observed and documented as well as the relation at a 1:1 scale i.e. the relation between people and the urban environment.

The studio resulted in a collection of propositions for urban rooms situated along/in the civic spine of Melbourne. Student projects addressed a perceived anonymity of the city, the rush, the disengagement of people occupying it, their habitual occupation of the city, the flow/stream of people, goods, capital.

Interior-making became an intervention in these flows and forces to produce interiors as space which differentiated from the banal, which heighten, highlighted and intensified, enabling people to inhabit another space, an interior condition physically and mentally.

Sarah Jamieson's interior design is a proposition for an intersection which makes use of existing infrastructure such as public seating and trams. The interior becomes a space-time of thermal quality – where the passing of trams generates energy producing heat through existing pipes and infrastructure as well as becoming wall-like when they stop to pick up and disembark passengers. (Figures 4 & 5)



Figure 4. Sarah Jamieson *On* 2009. Design proposal for *Urban Room* studio.



Figure 5. Sarah Jamieson *On* 2009. Design proposal for *Urban Room* studio.

*Temporal Occupations* was another undergraduate interior design course – a specialisation – following on from the *Urban Room* studio. Held in Berlin, Germany; Brighton, UK and Melbourne, Australia, the idea of a temporal occupation was addressed in each city by the participating students. Temporal occupation suggests a different approach to inhabitation from one which assumes an occupation of space through built form. As none of the students had been to Berlin or Brighton, the question of how one encountered and inhabited other spaces was a tangible aspect of the brief. The idea of a temporal occupation engaged with the immediate present, their

encounters as well as a negotiation with an extraordinary past that was present yet remote from each of us. Instead of approaching the city through a spatial framework – such as maps and itineraries which map out space in advance – students were invited to spend time in the city and to document a temporal occupation and consider what was being worked and transformed through the occupation, duration, what was the shift in program, how was this being done (what are the materials; the forces – historical, social, cultural; the sightlines etc). They then were asked to consider how their sightings might collectively re-territorialize the urban fabric and how through a provisional composition (an exhibition) create intensification and encounter with another space / way of thinking about the city. An exhibition was described as a temporal arrangement and an interior as a temporal consistency into which participants/viewers were connected.

Alice Kohler re-worked street posters and carved into this surface as a process of temporal occupation – an interior-making which surfaced a past. (Figure 6)



Figure 6. Alice Kohler *Archival City* Berlin, Germany, 2009. Design proposal for *Temporal Occupations*. Photograph: Alice Kohler.

Through the idea of arrangement and re-arrangement as an act of highlighting, Sarah Jamieson transformed existing space. The insertion of a yellow banana on a handrail in the yellow subways of Berlin highlights the yellowness of the surroundings, producing an encounter through intensification – the sensation and affect of yellowness. (Figure 7)



Figure 7. Sarah Jamieson *Highlight* Berlin, Germany, 2009. Design proposal for *Temporal Occupations*. Still from video produced by Sarah Jamieson.

*Engaging space. A practice of arranging*, a Master by Research Project undertaken by Sharn Lim attended to the question of interior-making through the observation and detailed analysis of street vendors in Singapore and Taipei in relation to interior design techniques.

In *Tactics Of The Peripatetic: On Vendors Making An Interior Of The Street*, a conference paper based on her research, Sharn succinctly positions the orientation of the research: ‘As agents of the street, vendors’ practices provide the framework for spatial arrangements of an intimate and temporal scale. How are street vendors employing tools and tactics to create interiors, and what are the implications for the Interior Designer? The production of interiors is positioned as a practice constantly adaptable to reengage with the conditions of its surroundings. This paper investigates an opportunity-dependent practice; poaching, inviting pauses and being mobile are analysed as tactics for interiorisation’ (Lim, S.S. 2008)

Fascinated by street vendors in her home town of Singapore and also in other cities such as Taipei, Sharn observed the improvised, the mobile and transformative aspect of street vendors in relation to her question of interior-making. She noted distinguishing aspects of the way vendors engaged spatial and temporal conditions through ‘adaptive arrangements and spatial negotiations’ (Lim, 2007: 7), utilizing everyday practices and small actions to ‘make temporary interiors, almost instantaneously, of any space’. (Lim, 2007: 11) She documented many street vendors in Singapore and Taipei. (Figures 8 & 9) Her photographs make visible the interior-making she observes – a process of collecting and arranging both things, space and time as improvised responses to different situations – as a process of interior-making.



Figure 8. Sharn Lim Street vendor, Taipei from *Engaging space. A practice of arranging* Master by Research (project), 2007. Photograph: Sharn Lim



Figure 9. Sharn Lim *A Beverage Vendor, Taipei* from *Engaging space. A practice of arranging* (Master by Research (project), RMIT University, 2007). Photograph: Selina Lim

Also addressing the conjunction of urban and interior is *Urban Interior*, a university-based research group. Assembled in 2007, *Urban Interior* is a collective of different practices and disciplinary nuances from landscape architecture, interior design, industrial design, architecture, visual art, craft, fashion, performance-based practices and sound. The name *Urban Interior {UI}* is an umbrella under which people gather – a space which is temporal and mobile, which opens to accommodate and connect people in processes of exchange and production.

The impetus of its research agenda is propelled by the dynamic changes occurring to the urban

environment in the twenty-first century. Urban Interior {UI} investigates the relation between people and the urban condition. As mentioned earlier, the urban fabric and in turn people's lives will change significantly as density increases and issues of security and sustainability become foregrounded. Already a substantial amount of research is being conducted in the areas of urban planning, urban design and environmental sustainability in relation to cities. Urban Interior {UI} positions its research within this context with a focus on the *relation* between people and the urban condition, hence the word 'interior' where interior is to be understood not as built fabric so much as people's relation to and inhabitation of urban environment. {UI} addresses the material, sensory, physiological, cultural experiential dimensions which create and affect social relations. Concepts of public and private, individual and community, interior and exterior have become dynamic inviting new ways of thinking and practising in the urban realm. The questions posed by {UI} include: 'What might be the contribution of design disciplines to new modes of urban inhabitation? How can temporary inter-related design actions in urban conditions mediate the kinds of qualities needed to sustain and enrich the increasing inhabitation of urban areas?'

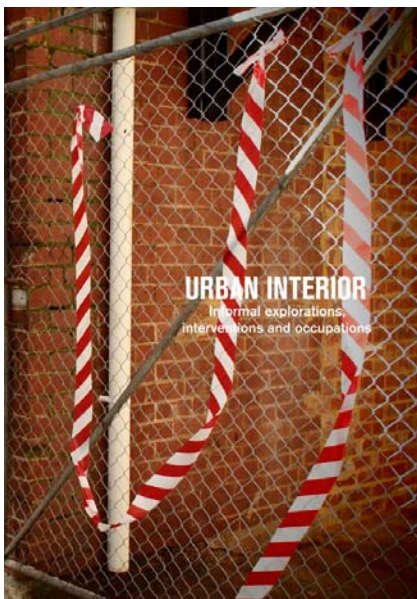


Figure 10 *Urban Interior. Informal explorations, interventions and occupations 2011*. A recent publication by *Urban Interior*.

As part of a {UI} research project – *Urban Interior Occupation* at Craft Victoria, Melbourne, in 2008 – {UI} member Mick Douglas and the Cultural Transport Collective held a *Ride-on-dinner*. People gathered with their bikes, food was prepared and cooked, napkins distributed, followed by eating. Entrée, the first course, was consumed in an outside space between two buildings off a Melbourne laneway. (Figure 11)



Figure 11 *Ride-on-dinner Urban Interior Occupation*. Photograph: Jacob Walker, 2008

Then everyone mounted their bikes and rode together through the city, interrupting and redistributing the flow of peak hour traffic, moving to the banks of the Yarra River where the main course was cooked and served, people gathered and ate, then crossed the river, passed a Ferris wheel which was slowly circling, cycling along beside the river to a boardwalk area for dessert. (Figures 12-14)



Figure 12 *Ride-on-dinner Urban Interior Occupation*. Photograph: Jacob Walker, 2008



Figure 13 *Ride-on-dinner Urban Interior Occupation*. Photograph: Jacob Walker, 2008



Figure 14 *Ride-on-dinner* Urban Interior Occupation.  
Photograph: Jacob Walker, 2008

Hospitality, the activity of cooking and eating, of gathering and exchanging, creating and producing relations re-functionalised and re-contextualised the city in a process of interior making. The mobile kitchen – a bike on wheels – with the capacity to cook for a 100 people was a crystallization strategy which spread out making relations spatially and temporally, producing a contingent urban interior.

The mobile kitchen concept was developed by Anthony Hamilton-Smith – a collaborator in the *ride-on-dinner* – for his final year thesis project in interior design at RMIT. (Figure 15) Here a mobile kitchen moves to different places and in the process produces communities and gatherings (like a soup kitchen). This kind of design is both product and interior – an object which becomes an interior design through the amplification of spatial and temporal conditions to enable inhabitation. Anthony writes ‘The aim of the *Slow Kitchen* is to create “a space” with which we can connect. A space in which we see and experience the food production cycle, from the ground to our plate before us. A space within which we may comprehend and see the ideas embodied by the Slow Movement in practice.’ (Hamilton-Smith 2011). Anthony’s final year thesis project was awarded a national graduate design award in the category of interior design – a sign for and of the future.



Figure 15. Anthony Hamilton-Smith *Slow Kitchen*  
2008

## CONCLUSION

The Italian designer Andrea Branzi writes of the city as a continuous system of relational forces and flows. ‘The city is no longer just a bunch of “architectural boxes”, having transformed itself into a territory of commodities, exchanges, information and services. ... 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 that ...[the city] needs to be continuously “re-functionalised” in order to give hospitality to unexpected activities ... No more as separated environmental realities, but rather as active elements of an enzymatic territory, always changing its function and form.’ (Branzi 94, 96)

The projects presented and discussed in this paper – each a proposition to and actualisation of the conjunction urban and interior in relation to the inhabitation of cities – invite new ways of thinking about the practice and role of interior design in the twenty-first century. They also highlight new ways of addressing the inhabitation of cities – from one which privileges a spatial and built emphasis to one which engages with contingency and movement, temporal as well as spatial conditions.

The potential of approaching the city as composed of flows and relations rather than buildings and structures is offered up in all the above projects. Through the conjunction of urban and interior, it is possible to think of different kinds of interior-making and interior designs – from built form to compositions of arrangements and relations; and different modes of inhabitation.

They offer trajectories and potentials for the possibility of imagining ‘the logic of a situation in which many possible worlds might co-exist in a single dynamic space. ... many cities at once, and always another city in the city (Rajchman 1999: 154, 155).

The potential here for interior design in the twenty-first century as ‘the century of the city’ to become an urban practice and as an urban practice one which addresses the relation between people and environment where interior design as a practice of designing interiors – interior-making – becomes a critical focus.

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