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Suzie holds a PhD by practice/project titled 'interior, practices of interiorization, interior designs; a Master of Arts Design and bachelor's degrees in Interior Design & Art History with Indian Studies. Research is conducted through practice and experiments with new productions of interior and interiority in relation to modes of living, inhabitation, subjectivity and pedagogy. Collaborative research projects include urban + interior an international publication; beyond building with the Australian Childhood Trauma Group; Abacus Learning Centre for children on the autism spectrum. Suzie has published widely and supervises PhD candidates as part of RMIT Practice Research Symposium in Melbourne, Barcelona and Saigon.

?Interior and interior designing

Dr Suzie Attiwill

Abstract

The invitation to contribute to a journal issue 'celebrating women designing design' prompted thoughts as to whether I have designed interior design, a discipline in which I have been practising as an academic, teacher, student, designer since the late 1980s. And if so, how and why. Reflecting on this time, a recurrent concern with the concept of interior as a problematic becomes evident. This essay follows this refrain that has shaped my trajectory and contribution as an interior design student and academic.

Keywords: Interior, interior design, history, theory, philosophy

My entry into the territory of interior design was as an undergraduate student. I had previously completed another degree in art history with Indian studies and decided on what I thought was a career change. However, I have come to see how I brought a genealogy of interests that was different to that of many colleagues and peers who had studied architecture and trained as architects. My studies in art history included the Renaissance (the invention of perspective, the context of the Enlightenment that placed Man at the centre of knowledge/knowing), Baroque art (Caravaggio's paintings where figures seemed to spill from the frame into the space of the viewer, where space was understood through movement), contemporary art (Duchamp's experiments with object, space and viewer relations; site specificity as many possibilities; critiques of the gallery as a white cube and space as

empty and neutral), design history and art history itself. It was also a time when poststructuralist theory was active; I found *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) and the writings of Michel Foucault on power and knowledge inspiring as they enabled a way to think differently as a young woman.

During my studies in interior design, I encountered a kind of essentialism in terms of how concepts such as 'subject' and 'space' were understood. While, as students, we were encouraged to experiment and expand the concept of interior design through re-framing it as spatial experience, 'experience' was assumed as that produced by an individual subject; as given and natural rather than something which was based on particular philosophical ideas, in this case phenomenology. Historical and theoretical work concerned with how to position and articulate the specificity of interior design as a discrete discipline emphasised space to distinguish interior design from interior decoration. In the 1990s, three key theoretical texts were produced – *A Philosophy of Interior Design* (Abercrombie, 1990); *The Interior Dimension. A theoretical approach to enclosed space* (Malnar & Vodvarka, 1992); *Interior Architecture* (Kurtich & Eakin, 1993). All discussed interior design in the context of architecture. This view was further supported by a key historical text, *The History of Interior Design* by John F. Pile which was first published in 2000, where he states 'interior design is inextricably linked to architecture and can only be studied within an architectural context' (Pile, 2014, 11).

Joining the discipline as an academic, my knowledge of history and theory led me to take on the role of history and theory coordinator for the undergraduate interior design program at RMIT University (1999-2009). I took this as an opportunity to review the curriculum

and shift the focus to one which invited students to critically consider the concept of 'interior' – historically and theoretically – and to see the potential in 'interior design' as a practice of designing interior. I brought together a range of experiments (a term I preferred to exemplars/examples) from art, architecture and film where the concept of interior was specifically addressed.

Introducing students to this array was not to re-write history as a re-righting nor to present them with a set of precedents for interior design so much as to invite them to pause and think about the concept 'interior' before designing and to see how it is a production as distinct from necessarily assuming it as an enclosed space to be defined and revealed. An important reference that guided my approach was a conversation between the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault where they discussed theory: 'A theory is exactly like a box of tools. ... It must be useful. It must function. And not for itself ... A theory does not totalize; it is an instrument for multiplication and it also multiplies itself' (Deleuze & Foucault, 1977, 208). I wanted students to appreciate how a theory works as 'a box of tools' in designing and from this, how different theories created different interiors – spaces and subjects. And that understanding this was an empowering position for an interior designer.

This approach has continued – and perhaps this is where/how I have designed interior design – by working with the concept of interior in conjunction with design as a verb – as designing, and how this is different to interior architecture and interior decoration where interior is an adjective for something already existing. Interior design keeps the question of 'interior' open as a creative proposition and problematic. Later, during my PhD research, I invented the question ?interior where the question mark coming

before brings attention to 'interior' and the curious grammatical arrangement forces a pause that potentially interrupts assumptions of interior as necessarily enclosed space. The question mark beforehand also opens 'interior' as a problematic which is different to 'interior?' – a question concerned with identity and identification (what is interior?). Posing ?interior invites a shift to practices of interiorization where selection and techniques/box of tools become critical.

Writing has also been an important way of designing interior design, extending this thinking through teaching and with students into the discipline more widely through conferences, events and publications.

An article published in 2004 titled *Towards an Interior History* brought history and interior design together with a particular emphasis on foregrounding the spatial and temporal qualities that are implicit in both practices. It introduced a term 'inter-story' – formed from a conjunction between interior and history – as a technique for re-thinking history and interior design (Attiwill, 2004). At the time, I referred to myself as 'a history designer' and distinguished this from a design historian (Attiwill, 2003). 'Inter-story' was offered as an invitation to experiment and invent new interiors through a focus on concepts of interior and dynamic relations between interior/exterior: 'a tactic to enable an encounter with history in relation to thinking and practicing now. Privileging the criticality of the concept of interior and acknowledging the value of history in this conjunction, inter-story invites experimentation with what can be thought and said in relation to interior design with a view to connecting current forces and inciting future practices' (Attiwill, 2013b).

Along a similar trajectory, in 2006, I convened a discussion as part of a design festival: *What's in a canon? The state of interior design at the beginning of the 21st century*. A panel of practitioners, academics, graduates and editors were invited to respond to the question of the value of having a canon for interior design (with reference to how there is an architectural canon and its value for the discipline) and if there is perceived value, what works would be included in a canon for interior design. As with inter-story, there was an array of offerings from classic commercial interiors that marked significant shifts in workplace design to one panel member citing the experience of an underground cave as a canonical interior. I presented the outcomes from this panel at the first Interiors Forum Scotland conference in Glasgow – *Thinking Inside the Box* – and the paper became a book chapter (Attiwill, 2007).

Another text I wrote for *The Handbook of Interior Architecture and Design* (Brooker & Weinthal, 2013): '*Interiorizt* brings *interior* to the fore as a primary activity; as a focus on practice, interiorization, techniques and tactics. *Interiorizt* is a proposition for practicing, a way of seeing and saying, thinking and doing, attending to the question and making of interior(s) in the midst of contemporary forces that transform ideas of inside, outside and ways of inhabiting' (Attiwill, 2013a, 107). As with my approach above, drawing on an array of precedents to test and experiment with 'interior' as a creative problematic: 'located in the middle between past and future, this text is manifesto-like to address here and now. A series of interior designs will be sketched in as a proposed genealogy to intervene in the present moment and to invoke a current and future-becoming interiorizt' (107-8).

Other similar provocations to/with the discipline and in relation to my own trajectory and experiments with a specific box of tools

included: *INSIDEOUT* (Attiwill & Lee, 2004) – a symposium I convened with colleague Gini Lee that invited the disciplines of interior design and landscape architecture to come together while suspending the middle bit i.e. architecture which usually defines interior and exterior and to encounter what could be said and thought. The philosopher Elizabeth Grosz was invited as a keynote; her talk – *Chaos, Territory, Art. Deleuze and the framing of the earth* – offered the concept of framing as the first construction that establishes territory through a 'provisional ordering of chaos' that fabricates a space 'in which sensations may emerge, from which a rhythm, a tone, colouring, weight, texture may be extracted' (Grosz, 2005, 12).

These provocations were also engaged through teaching. In 2020, I invited philosopher Jon Roffe to develop a theory course on interiority for our interior design programs. Titled *From the inside out*, he developed a series of lectures and readings that began with philosophers who position a concept of interiority as first-person experience with its intentional character (Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty) through to a concept of interiority as a folding in a generalised exterior (Gilles Deleuze). Roffe said his aim was not to give a correct account of interiority but to complexify 'interiority' and 'to work on creating a concept of interior design'. Here he connected with Deleuze and Guattari's artisan in *A Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). The artisan's practice is one of coming into a situation, following existing movements and drawing out the potential they have to offer. As Roffe noted - like a carpenter who follows the knots in the wood and the grain, the artisan-interior designer follows the real material constitution of the world; material reality in all its peculiarities and singularities. Roffe proposed the interior designer is 'the one that follows or begins in context, that works "inbetween" other

practices, and that produces new spaces that modify the force of social striation rather than erasing them' (Roffe, 2020).

I connected with Roffe's approach as similar to mine in that it is not so much a question of which is essentially true or right and using philosophy to make universal claims so much as to appreciate the value of an array as demonstrative of the richness of ideas and how they produce ways of thinking and doing – each 'a box of tools'. In many respects, this indicates how Deleuze's philosophy has shaped this overall way of thinking. Roffe's concept of the interior designer as one who follows also has resonance with the approach of working into existing conditions i.e. the outside, following particular lines, selecting and folding in.

Over this time, others also engaged in specifically addressing the theoretical and historical territories of interior design – to name just a few which have extended the discourse of the discipline: *Intimus: Interior Design Theory Reader* (Preston & Taylor, 2006); *Toward a New Interior: An Anthology of Interior Design Theory* (Weinthal, 2011); *After Taste. Expanded Practice in Interior Design* (Kleinman et al., 2012); *Interior Design and Architecture: Critical and Primary Sources* (Taylor, 2013) as well as journals publishing peer-reviewed research: *Journal of Interior Design* (since 1975), *idea journal* (since 1996), *Interiors: design, architecture, culture* (since 2010), *Interiorities* (since 2018).

The focus of my interests on 'interior' and posing ?interior is specific in that it highlights 'interior' as a creative production involving theoretical/philosophical ideas (boxes of tools) and techniques. My work also places 'interior' in dynamic relation with exterior; this has involved making conjunctions that open interior in an exterior – 'inter-story', 'insideout', 'outside-interior', 'urban +

interior'. These provocations have encouraged and supported interest in situating interior design as a practice in the urban environment. In 2015, I co-edited a special issue of the *idea journal* which posed the conjunction of urban + interior internationally and we received an array of urban interiors including the architectural i.e. as inverted urban space and left-over space, the idea of urban as personal, intimate and domestic (Attiwill et al., 2015).

In relation to my own trajectory of learning and research, my PhD titled *?interior, practices of interiorization, interior designs* enabled me to experiment with my specific interests and concluded by saying how posing ?interior opens 'interior' 'to an outside of contingency, chance and variation – and invites an interior designing each time anew. This research places the question of ?interior in the world' (Attiwill, 2012, 130). Perhaps I could say this is my contribution to designing interior design in the twenty-first century: to encourage through teaching and research the criticality of posing ?interior in an exterior and as a practice of interiorization.

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