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Title:
A Future Interior is an Urban Interior

Date:
2019

Citation:
Hinkel, R. (2019). A Future Interior is an Urban Interior. Brooker, G (Ed.). Harriss, H (Ed.). Walker, K (Ed.). Interior Futures: Abstracted - Negotiated, (1), pp.112-119. Crucible Press.

Persistent Link:
https://hdl.handle.net/11343/313750

A Future Interior is an Urban Interior

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Abstract

A future interior will trespass the architectural envelope to take up its place in the city, on the streets, and in those urban spaces that remain open to a public. A future interior shelters the capacity to become an urban interior, emerging as a site of contest between commercial interests and the desire of a provisional community to gather, to voice its concerns, to imagine other possible futures, or simply hang out together. The future of practices dedicated to the interior must develop an attitude to the status of the urban interior, and the kinds of spaces it can carve out. The greatest risk to urban interiors is the compulsion to produce commercial economic outcomes, to curate atmospheric spaces that arouse experiences that can be monetized as part of the experience economy. Those urban interiors in which nothing in particular takes place, where no specific use is programmed, and yet which invite forms of provisional occupation are becoming increasingly rare in light of the ongoing diminution of public spaces and the lack of places available as a commons that might be indiscriminately shared by all. It is becoming increasingly challenging to even imagine how to occupy what I call an urban interior without attaching some commercial program or financial gain to it. It follows that the interior architect who is socially and politically engaged must pause to ask: How can the urban interior be saved from capitalist recuperation? This is an ongoing challenge for the discipline of interior design and architecture.

Interior designers understand that a small gesture can create a surprising impact when placed carefully in a large-scale urban context; interior design has the ability to change the perception and thereby the occupation of urban interior environments without necessarily changing the material constitution of the built environment itself. Often small gestures, minor insertions, performative acts and relational practices are enough. The urban interior can be mounted at minimal or even no cost, it can be quick and easy to implement, and it may prove more powerful than over-designed and

grandiose renovations and constructions. Interior design as a discipline is used to working at a small scale, but it has the capacity to create large effects out of sometimes meager means. To create an urban interior it is crucial to understand that well-funded resources and large material changes are not necessarily the answer. Less than an attention to the design of objects, formal gestures and large-scale infrastructures, interior design acknowledges the complex social relationships between human subjectivities and spaces. It is this capacity that interior design brings to architecture and that it likewise could bring to the urban domain.

A future interior will continue to trespass the architectural envelope to take up its place in the city, on the streets, and in those urban spaces that remain open to a public, that is to say a future interior shelters the capacity to become an urban interior. Neither entirely inside, nor outside, the urban interior is a site of contest between commercial interests and the desire of a provisional community to gather, to voice its concerns, to imagine other possible futures, or simply hang out together. The future of practices of the interior must develop an attitude to the status of the urban interior and what kinds of spaces it carves out. Urban interiors express themselves in myriad ways: with the grand architectural gestures of the forecourts and plazas of large, commercial architectural projects; amidst infrastructural nodes seething at rush hour then ghostly quiet once everyone has retreated home again; en plein air markets and amidst other impermanent architectures, partially covered, now here, now gone, depending on the time of day, and day of the week; or eking out an existence in-between, in seemingly leftover spaces, the couch discovered on the empty lot, for instance. The urban interior takes up all these expressions, and can be found in all these locales, but it also suggests opportunities for the practices associated with creating other kinds of urban interior. The attribute of the interior when attached to the urban context suggests places of sufficient shelter, different speeds of traversal, places that are not domestic and yet hold the potential for something intimate to be

shared. The urban interior challenges any neat distinction between what is private and what is public. The greatest risk to urban interiors is the compulsion to produce commercial economic outcomes, to curate atmospheric spaces that arouse experiences that can be monetized as part of the experience economy. Those urban interiors in which nothing in particular takes place, where no specific use is programmed, and yet which invite forms of provisional occupation are becoming increasingly rare. How, then, can an interior designer participate in maintaining the openness of the urban interior? This question becomes urgent in light of the ongoing diminution of public spaces and the lack of places available as commons that might be indiscriminately shared by all. It is becoming increasingly challenging to even imagine how to occupy what I call an urban interior without attaching some commercial program or financial gain to it. As I write, the well-known architect-designed Federation Square in Melbourne Australia is likely to be passed over to the control of Apple who are opening one of their signature stores there. At first this would appear to be an example of the commercial capture of what should be public space, but what is overlooked is that Federation Square is already controlled by the Federation Square Pty Ltd, who limit the number of people who can publically gather without a permit, and whose guards watch closely over suspicious occupants.[1] Of what interest is this to the interior architect who might otherwise seek shelter well off the streets and squares of our cities? The development of urban interior design experiments, such as those I describe below, in fact first emerged in the Melbourne context where I was teaching and where Federation Square was an often-explored site. My argument for an urban interior suggests that the concerns of the interior cannot be so easily contained, and that the presumed privacy of the interior is rather more entangled with the publicity of public space.

It follows that the interior architect who is socially and politically engaged must also pause to ask: How can the urban interior be saved from capitalist recuperation, from the logic

of dollar per square meter? This is an ongoing challenge for the disciplines of interior design and architecture. The ways in which interior design is able to create spaces for peoples and their relations is at the heart of what the discipline can do. Operating in a large-scale urban context, interior design can deploy the power of small-scale interventions. The gift of a park-bench that places us closer to the ground, or challenges what we thought a park bench should or could do. An interior designer understands that a small gesture can create a surprising impact when placed well in a large-scale urban context. As Fran Tonkiss argues, there are moments and means of escape that can be found in "more minor practices, tactics of space which rely on sudden or small gestures."[2] Interior design has the potential to intervene in public and urban places, to rethink the relations between peoples, places and things. The commercial capture of public spaces can be interrupted by the small gestures interior designers are capable of making. The challenge is to increase the vocabulary of these gestures, and experiment with the kinds of gestures that cannot be easily co-opted, but which remain open to a public so that they might rest awhile in the urban interior.

Matilda Emricson, a former student at Konstfack, inserts small samples of furniture into urban spaces. Her furniture resembles the language of the already present and 'official' street furniture. She inserts an additional, simple element into public space through an act of spatial and material hacking, which can be described as a procedure of 'copy-alter-paste'. She explores what might happen when she introduces new, flat, timber surfaces, painted green, into a park, which make reference to the existing benches provided by the municipality. This resemblance to already-existing park furniture creates a ruse whereby her urban interior insertion appropriates the appearance of authority, achieved through her detailed craft and resolution, which adds seriousness and value to her designed objects. By placing her bench insertions at different heights she also plays with our perception of informal practices, such as begging. By placing them at

different locations she invites other sorts of spatial occupations that have otherwise been restricted or neglected. Her 'Gift for the City' encourages other embodied relationships and interactions with urban artefacts and street and park furniture and subtly suggests new forms of occupation of public space.

Lija Silin frequently uses her own body in her experimental, performative practices toward urban interior interventions. In one performance she scales the walls and lets tourists pass beneath her along a narrow passage in Venice, Italy. In the first place this can be understood as a minor provocation taking place amidst the everyday, triggering comments and reactions from the passers-by. It is an experiment that demonstrates how unexpected behaviour, and acts outside the norm can offer the designer a different point of view on a situation, as well as a means of rethinking how space can be experienced in different, less habitual ways. Lija dislocates herself from the mass of tourists, and even tries out what it feels like to occupy a position of relative power and privilege, looking down on the passing tourists. At the same time she exposes herself, because she makes herself more vulnerable in her precarious position. Any act that challenges expectations and conventions both holds the potential to alienate others and to produce the opportunity for unexpected relational encounters with others. In much the same way, any urban interior gesture, irrespective of the best of intentions of the interior architect, can create a positive or a negative effect on its context. This performance might be upsetting or at least challenging for the performer and the people encountering it, but it also holds the power to demonstrate to others that one can act, occupy, interact and just simply 'be' in urban spaces in other ways than the accepted or expected ways. Guy Debord identified such encounters as belonging to the journey of a dérive, he called them a 'possible *rendezvous*', which is to say, a meeting place where something might happen. We appear to be afraid of strangers on a city street, unless we are following the same behavioural patterns or sharing an exceptional event, such as a street party or demonstration. One moment

a stranger, the next moment an encounter after which we might shift our perception and our modes of occupation.

These minor tactics or actions can be described as a soft interior urbanism. Doina Petrescu, Constantin Petcou and Anne Querrien in conversation with Antonio Negri argue that large revolutions are not always what is necessarily needed. Instead, small acts, undertaken with minimal resources, but maximal participation can produce opportunities for living alongside each other in more positive ways, and this is what they call soft urbanism.[3] Petrescu and Petcou's often cited EcoBox collective urban gardening project, and their more recent R-Urban project both suggest ways in which shared urban infrastructures mounted by local communities can create opportunities for intimacy and being together in what I describe as urban interiors. Lacaton and Vassal likewise carve out what I call urban interiors, whether that be in the space of a museum such as the Palais de Tokyo where they worked within the constraints of a partially demolished interior, or in Place Léon Aucoc in Bordeaux where they argued that only the smallest readjustments to the local park were needed to make it more amenable to occupation. A small scale and simple intervention such as Public Works' The Cube (2007), designed to travel across various sites around the New Homes Project in Granville, creates a mobile place for small-scale local events with an emphasis on curating community participation of an urban interior.

Interior design has the ability to change the perception and thereby the occupation of urban interior environments without necessarily changing the material constitution of the built environment itself. Often small gestures, minor insertions, performative acts and relational practices are enough. The urban interior can be mounted at minimal or even no cost, it can be quick and easy to implement, and it may prove more powerful than over-designed and grandiose renovations and constructions. Interior design as a discipline is used to working at a small scale, but it has

the capacity to create large effects out of sometimes meager means.

To create an urban interior it is crucial to understand that large resources and big material changes are not necessarily the answer. Less than an attention to the design of objects, formal gestures and large-scale infrastructures, interior design acknowledges the complex social relationships between human subjectivities and spaces. It is this capacity that interior design brings to architecture and that it likewise brings to the urban domain.

References

1. "Fed Square is managed by Fed Square Pty Ltd, which was established by the Victorian Government in 1999. Fed Square Pty Ltd is responsible for the co-ordination and management of self-governing tenancies, programming and marketing of all the public spaces and all aspects of asset management and development, " from http://fedsquare.com/about, accessed January 7, 2018.

2. Fran Tonkiss, Space, the City and Social Theory (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005): p. 131.

3. Antonio Negri, Constantin Petcou, Doina Petrescu, Anne Querrien, What makes a biopolitical space – a discussion with Toni Negri, in Multitudes 31, 2008, accessed 28.12.2017.

Author Biography

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