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Graeme Brooker

In the 1968 essay entitled *Skill 4: Assembled Enclosure*,¹ Kenneth Agnew described the ever-changing role of the wall in contemporary interior design. He depicted how changing technologies were now ensuring that this plane had to undertake new duties such as heating and servicing, responsibilities that went far beyond its traditional function of enclosing and delineating a room. Agnew's tone of writing expressed his anxieties about this development. He was unsure if this was a positive moment in the changes to the obligations of the wall. He sensed that where the wall could once be described as imagistic, its role was now being reduced to becoming a mechanism. At worst, he suggested that something had been irreparably lost as the wall was changing its responsibilities in the formation of interior space; tasks that he felt were being eroded by industrial methods of production. As he stated, somewhat apprehensively, "a wall was once a visual plane; it is now becoming a machine."²

In this essay, I will propose a series of observations that will extend the themes that were emerging in the *Assembled Enclosure*; these include notes on four aspects of the interior that I have termed the unfixd, becoming, dialectics, and resultant sensibilities around the production of inside spaces. I



Figure 1
The Hero Dry Cell
installation, in the sun gallery
at the Inujima Seirenscho Art
Museum. Credit © Graeme
Brooker.

have described these themes as “notes” because they represent commentaries that are non-systematic and are also speculative (Figure 1). I hope they will offer a cluster of ideas, ruminations, and reflections, all provoked by Agnew, and I propose that they offer an apposite contribution to the new iteration of this journal. Effectively, they are “notes” because they express a collage of thoughts, references, and discussions that, like the drawings in a sketchbook, could be revisited for later elucidation. In contrast to Agnew’s anxieties that colored his writing, my tone for the notes on the new assembled enclosure can be considered more expansive in a way that will, I hope, accommodate multiple connotations. I will do this by defining some critical themes regarding what these deliberations could mean. These four notes are suggested in order to elucidate and develop these themes.

Note 1: the “unfixed” new assembled enclosure

The unfixed qualities of the interior affords the discipline a default position that consists of a perennial recalibrating of its role and its meaning due to speculation on its parameters. This is evident not just in the word “interior”, but is also central to the ambiguous nature of where this space can be considered to begin and end. The interior is ubiquitous and pervasive. It surrounds us and is evident at all times until it is declared and demarcated as an “exterior”. Because of this, I think it is fair to say that the expediency of interior space – that is, its availability and primacy in all aspects of physical existence – ensures that it is always *accessible* for investigation. Because of this encompassing or *embodying* attribute, I would argue that it is a subject that *innately* absorbs the continual development of an expedient critical substance: a convenient analytical constituent that affords the interior a fluid quality. This is a condition that is initiated precisely because it is always so

readily *on-hand*. It is a situation that prompts unending speculation on its efficacy and its *substance*. In this context, the new assembled enclosure is an expansive environment. It is one that can encapsulate a position and a space that is far more significant than the wall plane and its function in making space as Agnew saw it. Instead, I propose that the new assembled enclosure is an unconfined arrangement of ideas, systems, objects, and elements: processes and environments that are – or can be – positioned in or around a particularized or expanded field of activities in the subject of the decorated, designed, and architected interior environment. In the UK, the uncodified status of the discipline of the Interior affords it an expedient critical substance, propagating a culture and a knowledge base that is expansive and one that is essentially fluid.³ In other words, the definition and cultures of practice, research, and education in the subject are yet to be unequivocally consolidated and explicitly systematized. Therefore, on this basis, the complex and uncodified conditions of the interior afford it the opportunity to continually redefine and experiment with its own meanings and processes. This situation offers the continuous opportunity to reiterate and redefine its fundamental and essential cultures of practice, research, and education. It is an enduring situation, one that embodies the persistent analysis of its relevance to the contemporary built environment. In my view, the unfixed qualities of the discipline are central to its intellectual veracity: because of its indefiniteness, the subject is predisposed to continually question the significance of its fundamental cultures – a situation that promotes a critical and indispensable unfixedness in all aspects of its production.

Note 2: the “becoming” new assembled enclosure

Its unfixed condition ensures that a unique disciplinary sensibility prevails. I propose that this is an approach that is defined by a distinct receptivity by the persons undertaking the creation of interior space, to that what is contingent, or found. This responsiveness to the existing defines agents in the field, and part of their proficiencies incorporates their sensitivities to divergent spatial circumstances such as what might be found on-site when working with already-existing spaces, or within the plan of a space yet to be built that is just a line on a page or a screen. These sensibilities are based upon an aptitude (typically attained through an interiors-based education). It is a sensibility that is engendered to question and challenge the particular qualities of the matter they are dealing with. This propensity for examining and adapting found or extant situations is one distinct feature of the sensibility of the agent of the interior. I use the term “agent” as the exploration of such existing matter recalls the work of a detective or forensics analyst, as they examine the matter that a case presents before formulating any appropriate strategies for dealing with it.

On this basis, I use the term “becoming”, as it evokes the purpose that resides in the sensibility involved in the processes of formulating the new assembled enclosure; that is, it stresses the belief and

acceptance of *contingencies* as a way of thinking about interior space. Contingencies are the recognition of *legacies* as productive instruments for the formation of a decorated, designed, or architected interior. Whether a physical element such as a structural component, an atmospheric quality such as sound, a perceptual factor such as memory, or an environmental entity such as light, analyzing and either suppressing or enhancing contingent elements from a site are vital aspects of the processes of creating interior space. Therefore, the *becoming* summarizes matter that is always in a state of flux, as new material can be uncovered at any time during the processes of forming an interior environment. This is a situation that ensures the persistent alertness to – and recognition of – strategies of scrutiny, consideration, and excision. The agents of the new assembled enclosure are experts in the *becoming* as they are acclimated to anticipate the unexpected in this found or contingent matter approach. It is because of their sensibilities that they are agile and adept at evaluating and editing what is found, matter that is then either discarded or incorporated into the processes of making new objects and environments.⁴

Note 3: the “dialectics” of the new assembled enclosure

The anxiety that Agnew expressed regarding the development of the wall exposed his concerns in relation to what is often regarded or described as the “slippery” qualities of the subject of the interior.⁵ In my view, far from being a negative condition of the subject, the fluid qualities of the interior are of paramount importance. It is the open-endedness of the subject, in conjunction with the adroitness of its agents, that is of considerable significance to the discipline. I would suggest that this disciplinary ambiguity manifests itself primarily in what Hegewald and Mitra call the “composite construct”.⁶ This is a history, an idea, a theory, an object, or an environment that is constructed from already-existing ideas and matter. The composite construct is an *amalgam* of this material, a fusion of adapted existing matter. It may also be described as the result of a *duality*, each element of which then becoming fundamental and particular to the comprehension and construction of a new idea, object, or environment. In the formation of interior space, these dualities might often be viewed as being at odds with each other. I call these dualities the “dialectics of the interior”. In this context, I suggest that a notion of traditional dialectical conflict – the dichotomy of one idea superseding another and thus rendering it redundant – is itself a redundant proposition. Instead, the dialectics of the interior are counterpoints that give the subject its resonance and fundamental attributes. Put more simply, the dialectics of the interior consist of terms to describe the space, such as inside and out, old and new, and private and public. These are a set of dialectical conditions that are complicit in the formation and existence of the interior and, I would argue, are critical to its formation and understanding. The dialectics of the interior ensure that vital to the history, theory, education, and profession of the discipline is a spatial ambiguity,

one that incorporates a dynamism that embodies the dialectic in the form of a spatial *counterpoint*.⁷

Note 4: the “sensibilities” of the new assembled enclosure

The willingness to accept the challenge of the unexpected defines an approach to the origination of the interior environment that foregrounds the propensity for contingent or provisional strategies in its formation. It is an approach that incorporates the capacity to interrogate the discipline’s remit and its territories of operations. This is a condition that I suggest is hard-wired into the DNA of the discipline and the agents within it. The propensity to interrogate the existing is a condition that is particular to the decorated, designed, and architected emphasis of the design of interior space. The “unfixed” and “becoming” qualities of the interior attract a variety of specialists with which to undertake its creation. Designers, architects, decorators, installation artists, and many others research, educate, and practice within this subject. For some, the appeal lies in the escape from the prescriptions of other, more regulated built environment subjects. For others, it provides the freedom to test different ideas within the context of inside space. Undeniably, the appeal of the logic and rigor of the interior resides in the fluid and interdisciplinary natures of the subject. The immersion in the negotiation and provocation of its boundaries and the freedom to experiment with its meanings and therefore its identities ensure that the sensibilities of the interior specialist are unique and foreground openness to speculation, contingencies, and a focus on the primacy of spatial ambiguities.⁸

To conclude, the first *Assembled Enclosure* encapsulated a critical moment in the development of the subject. This second iteration utilizes its title, which, in my view, is still relevant in its portrayal of a fluid entity, yet its tone is markedly different. In contrast to the first *Assembled Enclosure*, I would suggest that currently the dialogs in the discipline of the interior are far more expansive and robust in their scope, and much less prohibited and apprehensive than Agnew expressed at the time. This can be reflected very simply in even a brief overview of the last ten years of extensive activity in the publishing of work on this subject.⁹

Reviewing Agnew’s essay almost fifty years after it was published, it struck me that the wall that Agnew described was really a symbol for the status of the discipline of the interior. In my reading of his essay, Agnew was not only describing the role of a fundamental spatial component – he was also unknowingly observing the development of a new phase of the emergence of the interior. It was becoming a discipline that was evolving into a very specific and distinct entity, distancing itself from any other spatial counterparts. The discipline of the interior had started to undertake new roles and responsibilities, actions that were divergent from other built environment subjects. The wall, in Agnew’s assembled enclosure, really symbolized the founding of something contemporary and new.

I propose that these notes for the re-tooled *Assembled Enclosure* form a dialog that begins to encapsulate a snapshot of the interior in its current condition. It summarizes the new assembled enclosure as a collection of fluid ideas, processes, environments, and their relevant cultures of production. I propose that the new assembled enclosure represents an assemblage or composite of thoughts, a compound originated or formed from a series of elements amalgamated to define the formation of a particular framework of thinking about contemporary inside space.¹⁰

Notes

1. Agnew (1968).
2. Agnew (1968: 199).
3. In the UK, the Interior educator community has consistently resisted any form of attempt at the prescription of title by any of the numerous so-called professional bodies. The national subject association for interiors in the UK, Interior educators (www.interioreducators.co.uk), represents all interiors programmes in the country at Undergraduate/Postgraduate (UG/PG) levels.
4. These thoughts were initiated in a previous article (Brooker 2015).
5. For numerous years, the “slippery quality” of the subject was often described or utilized as a potential weakness in the subject.
6. Hegewald and Mitra (2012).
7. See Brooker (2017).
8. See *Interior Sensibility* in Brooker and Stone (2010: 24).
9. In the last decade, numerous publications have appeared taking the subject of the interior as their starting point. These studies are continually ensuring that the analysis and exploration of the interior is no longer a marginal scholarly activity.
10. Some of the initial speculations on Agnew’s article were originated in my foreword for Luciano Crespi’s “Design Innovations for Contemporary Interiors and Civic Art” (2016).

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Biography

Professor Graeme Brooker is the head of Interior Design at the Royal College of Art. His latest book 'Adaptation Strategies for Interior Architecture and Design' is published by Bloomsbury. Email: graeme.brooker@rca.ac.uk