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# Interior Matter(s): Proximities, Inhabitation, Identities

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*Reuse contains an earlier existing element, which is taken out of its previous context and it contributes to the creation of something distinct and novel in the present. This complex item can last as it contains an important element from the past and therefore constitutes continuity and contributes to the further establishment of tradition. As such, despite containing an element of the past, reuse looks forwards and not backwards. It does not represent an end but a new beginning (Hegewald & Mitra, 2012).*

This perspective essay is motivated by the ambition to appropriate thoughts prompted by Julia Hegewald and Subrata Mitra, and position reuse as a fundamental and distinct theme of the architecture, design, and decoration of interior space. In *Re-use—The Art and Politics of Integration and Anxiety*, the authors examine the utilization of reuse as a tool for analyzing and interpreting cultural and political change in ideas, objects, and environments. They use South East Asian and Indian design cultures to explore a wide range of cultural and political matter, analyzing how reuse has impacted art, architecture, and jewelry as well as regional legislature and religious and cultural institutions.

Hegewald and Mitra's thesis essentially centers on the exploration of a continuous approach to the evolution of the past. They do this through the analysis of its connection to the present as well as the future with periodic returns to earlier ideas and forms, which are then appropriated and adapted into the element to be transformed, be it legislature, objects, or spaces. Various authors contribute chapters to this edited volume, which details hybridity in art and politics, bringing together diverse examples from the region to represent what Hegewald and Mitra term a "transnational flow of ideas, concepts and objects." Upon reading this book, I was struck by the overlaps and resonances with the discipline<sup>1</sup> of interiors. Like much of the practices described in the book, the outcome of this combination of numerous corporeal and cerebral entities was a *composite construct*, an amalgam of thought and process with objects and environments, processes that chimed with how the production of the interior, its ideas, theories, and histories confirm reuse as fundamental to all aspects of its principles and cultures.

To situate reuse—as a critical condition of the cultures of education, practice, and research in interiors—is an approach that ensures that ambiguity, contingency, and a variety of particular sensibilities around on-site approaches to the production of knowledge about how the discipline can be established as an essential component of its primary values and principles. This approach is useful to the discipline because on this basis the cultures of the interior can be made distinct from other spatial practices. This approach can therefore shape its own distinct identity. This is also a useful course of action because the condition of the interior can be recognized as one that can be predicated on its unfixity, and on a sense of perpetual nascent emergence; a condition that others and myself have described as a sense of the *becoming* of the interior.<sup>2</sup> This is critical to its formation and ultimately the understanding of the interior. In short, this perspective article, the title of which is derived from my keynote talk at the 2016 IDEC conference, elaborates on three aspects of reuse that might be considered as fundamental elements of the conditions of fluidity and indeterminacy of the interior, entities that I propose are essential to its existence and comprehension. It outlines three conditions—proximities, inhabitations, and identities—because they encapsulate what I consider to be the fundamental *matter* of the interior. These are titled because, in my view, the various cultures of the subject of the interior—the cultures of

education, research, practice, and professionalism—all rely on a comprehension of the principles and processes of reuse.

Because of this dependence on these principles and processes, these three fundamental elements ensure distinction in and among all constructed environment disciplines, as they are the essential components of the matter(s) of the interior.

## Proximities

“Borrowed from Middle French *proximite*, from Latin *proximitatem*, nearness, vicinity” (Barnhart, 1988: 856).

As the dictionary definition suggests, proximities relate to elements or *things* that are near or close. It also defines matter that is somehow *connected* (usually anatomically related, such as limbs). Whether it is a line on a page (or on a screen) depicting a building that is yet to be built, or the material of an existing building about to be adapted, my view is that the designer of interior space is always working with what can be considered found material or what is already *on-site*. The nearness to hand of material, that is in close vicinity to the project or site, is just one aspect of the fundamental nature that proximities play in the creation of an interior. Therefore, in this context, proximities ensure that site, place, situations, locations, contexts, and the relationships between them are all proximities that can provide agency to influence the design of the interior. The analysis and subsequent understanding of these proximities affords the designer the possibility to generate new meanings, usually resulting in innovative environments in which they are contained. It is the documentation and subsequent translation of this extant material that can be utilized to affect and instruct the formation of ideas and the design of the new interior.

Furthering this assumption, I would argue that the principle aspect of proximities significantly impacts the cultures of interior education, research, practice, and ultimately the profession of the discipline. In short, proximities and their reuse inform the way we think, work, and substantiate the discipline. The simple fact of being connected to particular cities, buildings, rooms, and then their subsequent adaptation, is, in fact, the underlying code of the subject. This condition ensures that the agents involved in the interior have their very own specific processes and distinct ways of thinking. In the first publication I produced with co-author Sally Stone, we set out ways of understanding what is already *on-site*. We called this process “Rereadings.” We were influenced by the work of Giancarlo De Carlo, especially his thoughts expressed in a 1990 interview:

*I believe a lot in the revelatory capacity of reading. If one is able to interpret the meaning of what has remained engraved, not only does one come to understand when this mark was made and what the motivation behind it was, but one also becomes conscious of how the various events that have left their mark have become layered, how they relate to one another and how, through time, they have set off other events and have woven together our history.<sup>3</sup>*

This approach to utilizing found matter is nothing new, but I would suggest that it is a particularly contemporary approach to cultural production in the early twenty-first century. As commentators such as Nicolas Bourriaud have stated: “It is no longer a matter of starting with a ‘blank slate’ or creating meaning on the basis of virgin material but of finding a means of insertion into the innumerable flows of production” (Bourriaud, 2010: 17).

Acknowledging this in *Rereading's: Interior Architecture and the Principles of Remodeling Existing Buildings* (Brooker & Stone, 2004), we devised a methodology of reuse, one that interrogated and analyzed the existing matter to form a series of strategies for reuse: methods of design that were then realized with a set of tactics. It was our premise that this began with the analysis of any extant matter that included an examination of both physical matter, such as form and structure, and less solid material such as context, environment, history, and the proposed new function. Strategies were then devised and realized with a series of elements such as planes (walls, floors, and ceilings), objects (furniture, both natural and artificial light), surfaces, openings, and elements for movement (stairs, ramps, bridges, corridors, lifts, and escalators).

*Strategies* was the most innovative aspect of the book. The strategies we devised were solely based on the level of integration between the new interior and the extant matter, such as an old building. This relationship generated a dependency based on the intimacy and correlation between the new and the old. Strategies emphasized the importance of proximities through the reliance, or the affordance, of the existing space, and what could or would be used to adapt it. Each of the three strategies was based on the extent of the integration between the host building and the new elements. The three strategies were intervention, insertion, and installation.

### **Intervention**

This strategy emphasized the relationship between new and old where integration had occurred to such an extent that both were reliant on each other and had been almost fused together to create one entity. Intervention could be a robust strategy, demolishing and cutting away, as well as vigorously treating the existing with the imposition of new additions. As we said: "If the existing building is so transformed that it can no longer exist independently and the nature of the remodeling is such that the old and the new are completely intertwined, then the category is intervention" (Brooker & Stone, 2004:15).

### **Insertion**

Insertion was where the new elements and the old were more independent of each other than intervention. While deriving their proportions from the existing, the insertion would usually be placed inside, alongside, on top of, or underneath, and would maintain its autonomy yet be related to the existing by its proportions and scale. Insertion strategies were used to create a "new autonomous element, the dimensions of which are dictated by those of the existing. In other words, it is built to fit" (Brooker & Stone, 2004).

### **Installation**

The third strategy was installation. At the opposite end of the spectrum to intervention, installation is a strategy whereby the dramatic effect of an existing building can be emphasized by the installation of objects that will temporarily alter its perception. Whatever they are, usually installed elements are objects for display such as an exhibition, temporal or one-off events, or products in a retail space. These items will not alter the building structurally or in such a significant manner that would affect the building's form or structure when they are removed from the space. "The old and new exist independently ... should the new elements be removed then the building would revert to its original state" (Brooker & Stone, 2004).

These proposed methods of reuse ensured that a particular sensibility was developed in the education of the designer, architect, and decorator of interior space, because the ability to work with what already existed impelled a very different approach to designing with a “clean slate.” This approach promoted unusual pedagogical methodologies regarding space design. The evaluation of found matter, the edit of what is extant, and the promotion of contingency are very particular instruments for teaching and learning about the built environment. In addition, proximities and the usefulness or affordance of extant matter or things placed the interior discipline in a critically advanced position in the sustainable environment agenda. Interiors, often considered to be one of the most unsustainable of practices (primarily due to its faster turnover of projects and work), could be viewed, through a reuse lens as a more advanced discipline when considering that working with found or extant matter is central to its operations.<sup>4</sup>

Essentially, as the first condition, fundamental to the discipline of interiors, proximities regard extant matter—that which already exists, what is found on site, and how the interior architect, designer, or decorator adapts it and in turn constructs new matter. Proximities are the first critical and valuable *matter* in the formation and understanding of the interior.

## Inhabitations

“To live in or to dwell. French: *Habere*—to hold. Latin *habitus*, dress, demeanour, condition, character and behaviour” (Barnhart, 1988: 528).

Twentieth-century discourses around Modernity have favored functionalist ideologies with which to describe use. Functionalist tendencies were often dominated by descriptions of form. Form following function created a problem for the interior, especially when the predominant ideological condition of the discipline of the interior is the reuse of existing material. Proximities, the reuse and adaptation of found matter on-site, is problematized by a functionalist architectural approach to making space; one where form is prioritized to follow function. This is inappropriate when a building is being reused, often because its function is lost or its form is, or has become, redundant. In *On Altering Architecture*, Fred Scott describes this process of redundancy as a process of atrophying: “In a functionalist model, all works of architecture stand in danger of being considered at some time or other, by some agency or other, as a waste of space” (Scott, 2008: 5).

During the reuse of existing matter, form and function can be uncoupled, and considered as no longer useful as drivers of the design processes of the interior. The dominance of functionalist tendencies is arguably one reason why twentieth-century design has overlooked the interior as the site of spatial experimentation. In general, design icons of the twentieth century have canonized a new build approach to the built environment.

This is not to say that reuse was not undertaken,<sup>5</sup> but somehow reuse projects have not been considered *exemplary* in relation to the unfettered and clean functionalist model. In fact, throughout the twentieth century it was often considered that the reuse of a building was just not viewed as a relevant or seriously considered approach to the design of the built environment. “It’s only recently that you could reuse a building without losing your standing in the profession.”<sup>6</sup>

If reuse is considered the critical condition of the interior, then I would suggest that along with an approach that prioritizes proximities, the inhabitation of space, its occupation, possession, and participation in dwelling are the critical terms of inhabitation for the creator of interior spaces. In this context, there is a very different

history of the interior to architecture—a history where, chronologically and stylistically, the architectural envelope is just a shell that is a space to be reused when it has become redundant.

As the second matter of the interior, *inhabitations* describes a place in which to reside or to dwell, not a formal condition that is a result of function. *Inhabitations* is specific to the interior because it outlines more human traits and elucidates behavioral factors such as *acquiring possession* and *situation* when taking hold of space. It also describes human conditions such as behavior, character, and performance. In my view, inhabitation symbolizes occupancy, interaction, and participation. It is not a functionalist or deterministic approach to the creation of space. It describes a dynamic entity, and implies vibrant and *compelling* ways of speculating about the lines and boundaries that enclose the various forms of occupied spaces. Processes of inhabitation can be analyzed and developed to create new ways of thinking about *being* in the built environment. These can be reflected in a number of ways, ranging from designing innovative and new uses of space through to the adaptation of existing buildings, elements, and spaces for new forms of inhabitation. It matters that we occupy space, and that we take possession of it in order to inhabit it. I would argue that we, the architects, designers, and decorators of inside space, are not functionalists, but instead we participate with the environments we construct and the users who inhabit them through a dynamic speculation on what matter we are reworking to construct meaningfully *occupied* environments.

## Identities

“Sameness or oneness. Latin—*Identitas*” (Barnhart, 1988: 505).

In the sixteenth century, *identitas* was used to describe something that was the same or very similar. One-ness. Only since the seventeenth century was the word used to describe something relating to individuality. Identities are the third fundamental matter for the interior. On one hand, it is a term used to explain surfaces, both found and imposed, and also used to represent materiality, technologies, and systems, both applied and discovered. These are the detailed and inscribed overlays that narrate the stories of proximities and inhabitation. A successful detail or a well-constructed identity, will be able to portray an account of the entire content and trajectory of a project. The legacy of such material considerations, as well as their application, will also form the basis for any future appropriations of a site. The creation of distinct and significant identities forms the fundamental understandings of a designed interior space. In “The Tell-Tale Detail,” Marco Frascari (n.d.) describes this explicitly: “Details are much more than subordinate elements; they can be regarded as the minimal units of signification in the architectural production of meanings.”

The creation of distinct and significant narratives, accounts, stories of space, its occupants, and their inhabitations can be resolved through the construction of particular identities. We, the interior specialist, engineer identities. It is our role to construct spatial stories to communicate meaning as we plan the atmospheres.

We can also reflect on the matter of the identity of the discipline of the interior. Who are we? Who are the agents of the subject? What do they stand for? I view the interior as a broad discipline, able to accommodate a wide and diverse range of ideas, practices, and agents. It is unregulated in the UK, and in much of Europe. Its histories are not clear, its borders and boundaries are contested, and it is ambiguous as to where the interior as an entity might even begin and end. I think that this situation or *condition* is incredibly valuable, and is an

important *matter*, or constituent part of its identity. When something is so unknown, when we have to keep on asking what it is, this leads to a very important dynamic: a condition of constant speculation.

It is this speculation that ensures a constant return to the reappraisal of what the subject is or can be. I would include the complex matter of the regulation of the subject within this situation. Regulation of the discipline, through the prescription of title, and the specification of content, is a vote of no confidence. Protectionism reduces innovation and has the capacity to stifle the discipline. The unregulated status and condition of the discipline and of the profession are vital to the enduring qualities of speculation and transformation in the DNA of the discipline. This *unspecified* situation exemplifies and reinforces an ability to be agile and flexible in how it can adapt to change. Conversely, once something is known, shelved, filed, and regulated, it is canonized and concluded. The dynamic is lost. The energetic speculation is missing. As Bonnet states: “When the world has been fully codified and collated, when ambivalences and ambiguities have been sponged away that we know exactly and objectively where everything is and what it is called, a sense of loss arises” (2014: 14).

The openness of the subject is a critical aspect of its fundamental matter. Ambiguity and openness perennially ensure a constant vibrancy in education, practice, and research inherent in the cultures of the interior. These conditions ensure that uncertainty and change are fundamental to the discipline, maintaining a vitality that can only be cultivated in an unregulated environment. Therefore, identities, proximities, and inhabitations afford the interior a unique, unfixed, and open condition of operations in all aspects of its cultures of production.

When we combine these three matters, it reflects a discipline that is open, fluid, diverse, and subject to debate. It can accept different voices and a multiplicity of meanings and communication. It is fluid, ambiguous, unregulated, and open. Anybody can call themselves an agent in this field, and that is why I find it fascinating. In education, its post-disciplinary potential allows it to survive and be agile, to be revisited constantly. As Anne Boddington states:

*In a rapidly changing context and where post-disciplinarity has overwritten post-modernity, the potential of interior design lies in its fluidity and its liminal capacity to engage and to bring together different subjects and spaces. As such, the responsiveness and the intellectual agility of its academic community is vital in an emerging field that is less constrained by the conservatism and traditions of either fine art or architecture* (2012: 163).

As a unique discipline-specific process, the fundamental matter of the interior promotes responsiveness, understanding, and empathy with the built environment and its occupants because we are the people trained, educated, and professionalized to be responsive through understanding the matter I have just talked about. And for me this constructs and develops the wonderful thing I call the interior sensibility: the ability, empathy, understanding to understand, translate, and adapt what is already around us. As Toshiko Mori suggests:

*To be a good architect or a designer, I strongly believe we have to possess multiple perspectives and sensibilities, and be able to identify with diverse points of view and behavior and cultural patterns ... we have to be extremely observant and responsive, and responsibly promote empathy for other human beings.*<sup>7</sup>

Fundamental to all aspects of the cultures of the discipline, is reuse, the reworking of extant matter and the critical sensibility that is derived from these processes: the production of the matter(s) of the interior.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup>I use the term *discipline*, as opposed to *subject*, throughout this essay to denote all aspects of the production of the interior, ranging from its cultures of education, research, practice, and professionalism.
- <sup>2</sup>See Brooker (2015) and Hollis (2013).
- <sup>3</sup>Giancarlo De Carlo in conversation with Benedict Zucchi, Milan 1990. Cited in Zucchi (1992: 167).
- <sup>4</sup>In this context it might not be long before, like the provenance of food has become critical to its preparation and consumption, that the provenance of an interior will also become significant. Where did the material come from for this new interior and how far has it traveled to be in your inside space, are now critical issues. For instance, Superuse is a term coined by Architecten2012 to establish various innovative methods of reusing redundant matter. They use "Harvest Maps" where matter for a project is drawn from a certain distance from the site from which all material from the project is to be delivered. This proximity map, where the vicinity of matter is key, drives the methodologies and the aesthetic of the design solutions. Contingency and found objects become critical to the development and construction of the project.
- <sup>5</sup>For instance, Adolf Loos's American Bar in Vienna and Le Corbusier's Bestugui Apartment are notable examples of iconic twentieth-century designers adapting existing buildings.
- <sup>6</sup>Hugh Hardy cited in Diamonstein-Spielvogel (1978: 28).
- <sup>7</sup>Toshiko Mori cited in Zeiger (2016: 8).

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