ABSTRACT

Oceania: Interior Topographies

In Oceania the interior is always in flux, the result of a spatial paradigm that resists architectural enclosure and a definitive inside or outside. The two-fold spatial language of Polynesia, the porous architectural structures and the sculpted inhabited landscapes, create complex spaces that register as both interior and exterior. Interiority becomes here a partial or temporal condition that is constantly unstable, always becoming otherwise.

This paper explores Oceania’s interior topographies, those open architectural structures that, lacking fixed walls, are co-existent with the exterior, and the earthen interiors formed within the ground itself. It also presents my design work as embodied research into the interior as a partial or temporal condition that is always in flow: underpinning these spatial experiments is an ongoing theoretical inquiry into the Oceanic concept of wa (between-ness) and Western theories of becoming particularly as presented by Bergson and Deleuze. Oceania’s earthen partial interiors are explored in two buildings where internal articulated concrete ‘landscapes’ furnish space for seating, cooking, preparing food or bathing. The transient nature of interiority in the Pacific is tested out in two structures that, like the open-walled fale or whare, oscillate between enclosure and open-ness. These contemporary interior topographies operate in-between and across the boundaries of Western spatial disciplines and spatial typologies, both interior and exterior, architecture and landscape, changing through time and in response to the evental rhythms of inhabitation. This Oceanic design research complexifies concepts of inside and outside rendering these as temporal, rather than spatial, conditions that exist in a state of perpetual becoming.

PAPER

Oceania: Interior Topographies

Interior Topographies

Oceania’s spatial paradigm resists architectural enclosure and a definitive inside or outside with the result that interiority itself is always in flux. This flux condition is registered in the two-fold spatial language of Polynesia, the porous architectural structures and the sculpted landscape interiors. Interiority here is a partial or temporal condition that is constantly unstable, always becoming otherwise.

Oceania’s built spaces can be described as interior topographies as they collapse together categories of landscape and interior. In earthen ‘interiors’ formed within the ground, as in Aotearoa/New Zealand’s recessed whare, and in permeable architectural structures such as the fale, interiority is always in flux: such spaces manifest qualities of both exterior and interior but are always resistant to a singular or stable spatial identity. This paper explores these customary Oceanic spaces and also presents my design work (Ground House, Sounds House and Tokatea) as embodied research into the interior as a partial or temporal condition that is always in flow: underpinning these spatial experiments is an ongoing theoretical inquiry into the Oceanic concept of wa (between-ness) and Western theories of becoming particularly as presented by Philosophers Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze.

Oceania’s earthen partial interiors are explored in contemporary form in the Ground House and Tokatea, where internal articulated concrete ‘landscapes’ furnish space for seating, cooking, preparing food or bathing. The transient nature of interiority in the Pacific is tested out in the Sound House and Tokatea where, like the open-walled fale or permeable whare, space oscillates between enclosure and open-ness. These contemporary topographical interiors operate in-between and across the boundaries of Western spatial disciplines and spatial typologies: they are both architecture and landscape, both interior and exterior. The transient structures change through time and in response to the evental rhythms of inhabitation while the earthen interiors constantly shift in their reading of interiority or exteriority. Oceania’s built structures complexify spatial conditions of inside and outside rendering these as temporal, rather than spatial, conditions that exist in a state of perpetual becoming.
Oceanic flux
The Oceanic region is co-extensive with the Pacific Ocean and may also be understood as a continent of water. This paper focuses on Oceanic spatial practice and explores how the fluidity of this continent is manifested in cultural thought and built space. Writing on the sociological and spatial influence of the sea choreographer Lemi Ponifasio and academic Albert Refiti comment that:

“To be located in and around the Pacific is to confront the undifferentiated abyss that is the ocean. Of all grounds it is the most insubstantial because it has no particular identity, no fixed position(s), and if anything the sea severs the will to identify and tends to multiply and confuse the specificity of location – the oceanscape always pushes you hither and thither and one literally floats on it” (2003).

Ponifasio and Refiti argue that as a result of this fluid regional spatiality Pacific theatre reflects the multiplicity and movement of the sea: “Pacific theatre reflects the disparity of fixed identification and tends to deal with the moment, the temporal environment that is filled with (e)motion” (2003). Academic Mike Austin also invokes the ocean as an influence for spatial practice more broadly, suggesting that the open-ness of Pacific space echoes the “ultimate open space […] the marae roa the vast ocean itself, closed only by the horizon” (2002, p.7). Austin links this spatial open-ness with “the well known ma of Japan […] Ma is the gap, or the interval, the spacing, the in between, and in the Pacific it becomes the wa or va” (2007, p.8), an undefined and fluid space of temporal flux rather than enclosure.

Japanese architect Arata Isozaki discusses ma space as that which is “perceived as identical with the events or phenomena occurring in it; that is, space recognized only in its relation to time flow” (Isozaki cited in Pilgrim,1986, p.267). Tongan academic Tevita Ka’i’i refers to the va “as a space that signifies a relationship between time-markers, ta” (2008, p.3) while writer Albert Wendt describes the va, which is also the “wa in Maori and Japanese. Va is the space between, the between-ness, not empty space, not space that separates, but space that relates, that holds separate entities and things together” (1999, p.402). Maori academic Linda Tuhiwai Smith, in Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples, also describes the conceptual inter-relation of time and space when she notes that for Maori the “word for time or space is the same” (2002, p.50) and emphasises how this contrasts with Western thinking where “[s]pace is often viewed … as being static or divorced from time. This view generates ways of making sense of the world as a ‘realm of stasis’, well-defined, fixed…” (2002, p.52).

Durational Flow
As well as addressing Oceanic concepts of spatio-temporal flow this paper explores an alternative stream of Western philosophy that asserts time as a state of ongoing flux rather than stasis. Bergson’s complex, metaphysical ontology establishes “reality as a perpetual becoming” (1999, p.41) and condition of temporal flow. Cultural critic Elizabeth Grosz describes how Bergson’s “undermining of the stability of fixed objects and states and his affirmation of the vibratory continuity of the material universe as a whole … [renders] a philosophy of movement and change” (2008, p.6). Bergson terms this temporal change process duration which Deleuze, in his book Bergsonism, describes as “a case of “transition”, of a “change”, a becoming, but it is a becoming that endures, a change that is substance itself” (Deleuze, 1991, p.37). This force of becoming is immanent in all matter and establishes space, as well as time, as a site of ongoing change. Such a concept calls into question the stability of the material world asserting instead that the corporeal and constructed is always undergoing a change process.

Deleuze too asserts an ontology defined by temporal flows and dynamism. In this thinking the built object is also subject to the effects of duration. Deleuze refers to this durational object as an ‘objectile’. He describes this object-become-objectile wherein:

The new status of the object no longer refers its condition to a spatial mold - in other words, to a relation of form-matter – but to a temporary modulation that implies as much the beginnings of a continuous variation of matter as a continuous development of form. This is not only a temporal but also a qualitative conception of the object …
the object here ... becomes an event (1993, p.19).

The objectile is thus defined by its propensity for continual change with a concomitant continuous transformation of form. The object becomes flow, a processual state of matter subject to ongoing temporal modulations. Deleuze refers to Bernard Cache’s architectural objects, discussed in Cache’s text Earth Moves, as an example of the objectile. Performance theorist Dorita Hannah extends the field of the object-become-event to the wider architectural environment as she suggests that “within the dilating layers of the architectural objectile the built environment can be interpreted as space-in-action” (2008, p.23-24). The Oceanic spatial structures discussed in the following section of the paper exhibit just such a quality of space in action or space in transition as they problematize or render indeterminate the spatial conditions of interior and exterior.

Two-fold space
The landscape and the interior flow into each other in customary Oceanic architecture due in large part to the absence of a defined architectural boundary. There is a two-fold spatial typography/topography that can be characterized as ocean-spaces, those transient and porous architectural types, and ground-spaces which manifest as earth-recessed interiors. This dual spatial language establishes a spatial experience of partial or time-based interiority as interiors are registered within the earth or as architectural enclosure is increased or decreased over time via operable screens.

Like the temporal environment of the ocean, Oceania’s lightweight architecture embodies a spatiality of motion that is “thoroughly imbricated with the technologies, mythologies and aesthetics of movement” (2004, p.227). The condition of movement generates an ephemeral temporality in the built environment that contrasts with Western architecture’s aspirations to durability: “Pacific Island buildings are constructed in materials that decay rapidly giving the architecture a shifting and transient quality .... These dimensions of architecture in the Pacific contrast sharply with the fixity associated with Western architecture” (2004, p.227). The shifting and transient quality identified by Austin is evident in the fleeting duration of the lightweight constructions and in their spatial quality. Austin describes a partial containment which allows the building to ‘breathe’: “In Oceanic architecture solid walls are used only to define space that is open to the sky .... Pacific walls breathe and are permeable as fences and screens. Often they are temporary and suspended” (2002, p.7).

The fale or fare (Samoan, Tongan or Tahitian house) is an open, undifferentiated space, defined by a sheltering roof and by operable blinds that form a temporalised boundary. The housing for a vaka (canoe) is a similarly lightly bounded space, formed by an open-ended fold that is both wall and roof. These breathing architectures are defined by partial or permeable boundaries, the space within still subject to atmospheric flows of wind, sun and rain, both interior and exterior at the same time.

In New Zealand, there is a spectrum of Maori structures that have porous or partial interiors. These range from transient summer houses, shelters and child-birth houses; to the pervious screening afforded by wharau (shelter or cooking sheds) and summer whare (houses) formed from permeable natural fibres; and the open performative frames of the hakari or ceremonial food stage. Those whare made for child-birth were event-oriented structures, their habitation associated only with the process of giving birth (Makereti, 1938, p.127). Similarly, summer encampments of whare or wharau performed as temporal acts, their construction and inhabitation linked to seasonal rites of food gathering or cultivation, their materiality itself highly transient. In a thesis outlining her experiences of Maori customs writer Makereti describes a cooking structure partially open to the exterior:

Cooking was never done in a dwelling house, but in the open, or in a wharau or kauta (cooking sheds). They were shaped like a whare with uprights and rafters of wood. The sides were split boles of kaponga, tree fern, with a small space between each .... Smoke escaped through the door and the spaces between the uprights (1938, p.160-161).
The hakari was a primary example of a transient and performing architecture of openness. A massive elaboration on the whata, open timber platforms upon which food was stored, hakari were many-floored skeletal stages formed from timber uprights and horizontal platforms upon which food was displayed for major gatherings. Constructed for feasts (and thereafter redundant), hakari monumentally shaped the landscape as architectural constructions which lacked architectural closure (1999, p.268). The food formed an exposed interior operating to adorn and display, as the term “hakari”, similar to rakai and rakei (to adorn), suggests (Best, 1934, p.219).

The exposure to flows in these porous interiors generates space that is both receptive to, and coterminal with, the temporal environment. The architectural skin is established as a responsive threshold, rather than enclosing boundary, and thus both defines and denies the interior resulting in a doubled spatiality of interiority and exteriority. These porous architectures breathe and, in the case of the mobile screens of the fale, the transient child-birth whare or the skeletal frame of the evanescent hakari, perform as spatialised events or temporalised spaces.

Earthen interiors, such as the storage pits of the Pacific and the recessed whare of Aotearoa/New Zealand, are part of an Oceanic spatial practice where the ground becomes a material within which to form interior space. Such a practice complexifies the relationship between interior and exterior, creating space which is both or neither or some where in-between. These monumental interiors range in type from earth or stone platforms or temples (the heiau of Hawaii, and raised stone malae of Tonga and Samoa), ditch and bank fortifications, earthen or stone mounds for habitations or burial places, and recessed earthen vessels (Kirch, 2001). At the macro-scale these earthen constructions operated as a kind of monumental architectural landscape with recessed interiors while the smaller constructions formed foundations for individual architectural structures or acted as landscape ‘furniture’.

Described as field monuments by anthropologist Patrick Kirch, Tongan ‘esi (sitting or resting platforms for chiefs) furnished space, providing a raised earthen and/or stone-filled element upon which to recline (1990, p.210). The shaping of earth is apparent in Samoa also where “the majority of mounds were foundations for pole and thatch houses” (Davidson, 1984, p. 89) providing elevated grounds upon which to live. In the umu (earth oven), found throughout Polynesia, the ground provides a matrix or mould within which interior space can be shaped to provide a vessel for hot rocks and wrapped food and an insulating earth layer. The “bell-shaped pits and bin pits that were commonly used in tropical Polynesia for storing fermented breadfruit paste” (Salmon, 1991, p.38) again utilise this technology, forming interiors excavated from the earth.

In New Zealand, earthworking techniques were developed to a degree unseen elsewhere in Polynesia. Tropical Polynesia’s excavated breadfruit pits became, in New Zealand, the rua, partial or fully subterranean food stores such as the rua kopirom, a pit “in the ground into which water was conducted, and in which hinau berries were steeped, and, in later times, maize” (Best, 1974,107), as well as the much more common winter kumara stores which were central to the agricultural economy. The fully subterranean kumara store was known as the rua korotangi, a well-like small, underground interior. Ethnographer Elsdon Best also references accounts of water storage pits or cisterns, though he notes that this was not a common usage. The Polynesian umu in-ground oven transferred to New Zealand, taking on a second name, hangi. Taku-ahi, a “small pit fireplace lined with four stones” (Best, 1941, p.314), similarly used the ground to form a shallow interior vessel. The recessed whare puni, or sleeping house, formed interior space using the ground as a matrix and building mold.

Topographical interiors
The design-research presented here moves between and draws upon Oceanic and Western spatio-temporal concepts. As Austin notes the Japanese ma becomes in the Pacific the wa or va, where space is constructed as temporally fluid and is indeterminately bounded. The three buildings explored work in relation to this spatial indeterminacy and temporal flow, echoing those qualities found in Japanese and Polynesian transient and lightly bounded architectures or working with the interior-exterior earthen language developed so extensively within Aotearoa/New Zealand. Duration, becoming and between-ness represent different
formulations of a Western ontology of flow evident in philosophical, and more recently in architectural, discourse. These culturally differentiated concepts of flow have communalities while also representing distinctly different traditions of thought, founded in different social, philosophical, architectural and site specificities. Working between these concepts in relation to contemporary architecture sited in the Oceanic region further complexifies relationships and constructs spaces between.

Three buildings are presented here, the Ground House, Sounds House and Tokatea. The Ground House focuses on forming a space between interior and landscape while the Sounds House explores spatial flow. Tokatea embodies the two-fold spatial language of Oceania as it combines a topographical interior with a fluid, porous spatial envelope.

Transitioning between landscape, architecture and interior space the Ground House establishes the interior as an extensive and moulded concrete ‘ground’ that both forms and furnishes space. The folding concrete interior landscape that forms the ground floor of the house extends from the recessed winter lounge, to the dining and then kitchen levels.

The recessed winter lounge references the spatiality of the whare puni with its earthen walls. The ground plane is at eye level when seated, the exterior foregrounded. Like Tongan ’esi, the earthen furniture pieces, the articulated concrete ‘ground’ furnishes the interior of the winter lounge, recessing to establish a protected hearth in front of the fire, providing nooks for firewood as well as folding up to become a mantelpiece. Like the taku-ahi the fireplace is also recessed into the ‘ground’. This ground space is constantly in flux, performing as a recessed and furnished interior while also displaying itself as a spectacular ‘landscape’.

The concrete ground continues horizontally before folding again vertically to define the dining terrace of the house. The concrete vertical provides a space for dining paraphernalia, and then extends horizontally as the kitchen bench. The raised bench, formed like the floor slab, from cut and polished concrete, exposes the aggregate and shell embedded in the artificial ground. Hobs are recessed into this surface, the oven positioned below the concrete ground plane recalling the inset hangi. Beyond the kitchen a store area is inset that, like the rua kai store, is submerged within the ground as a kind of earthen vessel.

The landscape interior of the Ground House operates as a kind of geospatial continuum that fluctuates between surface, furniture or contained interior as a topography of becoming, a spatial condition that reads as both geographic terrain and interior environment. Like the wa,
va or ma spaces of the Pacific interiority remains indefinite here, the spatial experience problematised, somewhere in-between inside and outside, landscape and furniture, geography and object.

The Sounds House echoes the open-ness and flux of the channeled sea it overlooks. The building has two zones – one for living, the other for sleeping – that become ‘interior,’ these float within a larger partially enclosed timber field. In order to move between the living and bedroom zones one must traverse the open field with its powerfully framed view of the surrounding, changing environment: conditions of interiority and exteriority co-exist and amplify each other as part of the experience of the house.

Echoing Oceania’s ocean-spaces porosity or mobility are primary characteristics of the architectural enclosure. The house, like boat-based Oceanic architecture, is “imbricated with the technologies … of movement” (Austin, 2004, p.227), as louvres adjust, sliding panels retract and doors pivot open to form fluid or porous spatial territories. The space formed between the timber landscape and a partially enclosing roof is both contained and open to the view and elements: interiority exists here as a partial and hybridised condition. The open platform reflects the spatiality of the sea in its open-ness and its capacity for change: in open phase large sliding panels retract into walls and the platform extends into the living zone, forming a complex space somewhere between interior and exterior. In this open phase kitchen, dining and living spaces are partially interior, partially exterior, interiority located by the southern boundary wall and ceiling but undermined by the open-ness to the north, east and west. In closed mode, the partially enclosed timber platform remains a complex space in between inside and out, a ma, va or wa spacing that, like the ocean, both separates and connects.

The sleeping zone, like Maori wharau and whare, has defining boundary walls that resist architectural enclosure through their permeability. The bathroom, lobby and bedrooms enfilade as a porous and contiguos space. The bathroom pivots open at one end allowing the showering inhabitant to look across the partially enclosed timber courtyard to the exterior: this timber platform extends into the bathroom as decking over the channelled shower water below. The bedroom pods close to the sea view opening instead to the morning sun and the bush-clad valley: end walls composed of glass louvres both repetitively demarcate and also undermine the clarity of the spatial boundary. These louvre walls form space that, like Oceania’s open architectures, opens to the exterior as louvres ripple open in the heat of the
day, and then, with the cool of the night, fold back to a serried surface.

Conceived as a spatial field of partial or temporalized interiors, the boundaries of the Sounds House are multiple and mutable: discontinuous and perforated roof-walls form open zones; sliding panels demarcate or dematerialise space dependent on their contingent location; interlinked rooms and louvre walls form defined but permeable space. The resultant space is characterised by fluid boundary conditions that render spatial location and identity as conditional and contingent. Here spatial definitions of interior and exterior are problematised as an effect of temporalisation: space becomes characterised not by its boundedness, its interiority or exteriority, but by its flux between these conditions.

Tokatea combines the two-fold spatial languages of Oceania, making interiors as a continuous topography and establishing enclosure as a threshold that opens to the exterior. The primary space of the house is founded on a rocky slope and then extends out to meet an open timber platform. The house, like Oceanic buildings that respond to their temporalised environment, enables movement: roller blinds extend and retract; a storage wall is rendered active as doors open and close; cavity slider doors retract into walls; thin, full-height windows slide over the face of the exterior fibre-cement cladding. Mobile glass walls and louvres shift, setting the public space of the house into motion, causing it to phase change between interior and exterior. This a permeable space of change, modulating between ‘interior’ and ‘exterior’ as the large glass panels slide in response to elemental or inhabitational event. In open phase the space is a partially interior only, enclosed only by a strand-board ceiling and wall, but with a dining zone that is co-extensive with the outdoor timber platform, forming a space in-between inside and outside while the rocky landscape extends inside as a concrete sloping wall-floor.

In closed phase the articulated concrete landscape furnishes the main living space, enabling its programmes of lounging, cooking and dining. The topographical interior forms a bench-seat at the base of the angled wall-floor and folds up to form an over-sized concrete kitchen bench. Recessed within the elevated surface is the hob, beneath it the oven. Ruakai (storage vessels) of a sort are held within this extended ground plane, the pullout pantry stocked with cooking essentials, olive oil, tea, salt. Plates, cups, pots and pans are held within this folded ‘earthen’ vessel as are pullout rubbish, recycling and compost bins and three different kinds of water vessel, two sinks and a dishdrawer. At the end of the concrete bench is the fire, held within the artificial ground.

Tokatea’s performative architectural boundary causes space to phase change between interior and exterior as large glazed panels slide or louvre walls pivot open. When the evental
boundary is open the timber dining space blends with the outdoor timber platform while the angling concrete wall-floor becomes contiguous with the sculpted rock slope, interior becoming landscape; when closed the articulated concrete landscape becomes a topographical interior, recalling the recessed earthen-interiors of Oceania. These spatio-temporal shifts perform the everyday inhabitation of the house, displaying interiority as an evental condition.

**Interior as becoming**

Influenced perhaps by a constantly changing fluid environment, Oceanic concepts of wa, va and ma merge space and time, forming these in built space as intermeshed conditions. Customary Oceanic space is in flow, interior and exterior experienced as a flux condition due to temporized or indeterminate boundaries that disrupt spatial containment and a fixed interior. The resultant spaces are complex and resistant to a definite or constant spatial categorisation – interiority here is time-based or qualified, constantly becoming otherwise as spatial conditions or registers change.

Inflected by Oceanic concepts of spatio-temporal flow and Western notions of durational flow the contemporary spaces explored here enact change rendering interior and exterior or site and space as temporal or contested conditions. One aspect of Oceania’s two-fold spatial language is explored in the landscape interiors of the Ground House and Tokatea: here interiority is constructed in relation to the exterior ground plane, these spatial conditions collapsed together as a topographical interior. An extensive and articulated concrete ‘ground’ becomes an iconic ‘furniture’ piece that recalls the ‘esi of Oceania or the recessed whare and furnishes space for living. Geography here, as posited by architect Bernard Cache (1995, p.70), prevents architectural closure, forming rather a topographical continuum that extends through into our built spaces and furnishings.

Oceania’s other spatial language, the lightweight and mobile architectures, are engaged in the Sound House and Tokatea. Here space forms and reforms as and through the event. As the active architectural envelope performs it “ceases to be a backdrop for actions, becoming action itself” (Tschumi, 1998, 149) and interiority is set into motion. Oceania’s customary architectures and the design research explored here attest to the complexity and instability of interiority. Interiority is established here as a performative condition, always in flux, always becoming other.

**References**


---

i Design by Archiscape, project leader Amanda Yates.
ii Design by Archiscape & JDA, project leaders Amanda Yates and Stephen Bonnington.
iii Design by Archiscape, project leader Amanda Yates.