

## Seeing the Unseen: Confronting the Real in Depictions of Lived Environments

In a discussion of the idealised interior depiction and its deficiencies, it is of concern to define exactly what is meant by the terms *actual* and *authentic lived experience* in the context of this paper, and how such experiences may lead to or become *traces of habitation*. It's fair to say that there is a disjuncture between the room presently occupied, and the room that presents itself in the magazine beside me. Disregarding the variation in aesthetic and spatial qualities, as well as the alternate modes of existence (one pictorial, the other spatial), the primary difference of concern to this argument lies in the evidencing of everyday living. To provide a further illustration: the act of sitting, reading, and typing at this table has resulted in layered hand prints to a transparent glass top: (it should be wiped clean, but not until this present task is complete). Newspapers and a random assortment of items disrupt the remaining surface: (they should have been tidied days ago). One dining chair is misaligned: (push the chair in as you leave the table). Shoes slipped off in haste remain by the door: (they should be returned directly to the wardrobe). Water glasses sit by the sink: (straight in the dishwasher please). I could go on, it could get worse... Prosaic, ineffectual signs that the room is currently or has recently been inhabited; signs which are so obviously absent from the published image, and represent the divergence between ideality and actuality in the context of the spatial depiction.<sup>1</sup>

As suggested by the pestering, judgemental voices, these signs, while being perfectly reasonable and inevitable manifestations of everyday living, are suggestive of disorder, a lack of cleanliness, laziness, slovenliness, neglect, a doubtful morality, a questionable work ethic - relating not only to the immediate living environment but also to the self (Douglas 1978). It is in this way that the residue of everyday living becomes a surface of expression for personal flaws and inadequacies through the medium of the lived spatial environment, thereby enabling these environments to become direct extensions of our person. This actuality of living combined with the unchallenged acceptance of the ideal interior depiction as normalised, suggests a divided knowledge of the spatial environment. However, it is understood via non legal jurisdiction, that the actuality of living should remain undisclosed in both material form and pictorially.

At the risk of over generalising, the fundamental intention of interior design as a specialised activity must satisfy the need for occupation and habitation. Further, in order to distinguish the designed from any other spatial environment, adequate accommodation should symbiotically accompany an enhanced experience. A balance between the functional and the aesthetic is necessary – too much of either and the design ceases to constitute the good. Kevin Melchionne in *Living in Glass Houses*, uses Stanley Abercrombie's example from the *Philosophy of Interior Design* where he states that 'we cannot live *in* art or even in a 'white cube.'" Melchionne goes on to explain that 'of course, what Abercrombie means is that we cannot live in interiors entirely given over to aesthetic vision and, consequently, divorced from all consideration of what it might really mean to inhabit them' (Melchionne 2006, 228). This reasoning, however, does not extend to the depiction of spatial living environments within the design disciplines, where traces of habitation fail to surface, and aesthetic vision is prioritised. The resultant relation of the interior depiction to the balance

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<sup>1</sup> While the ease of manipulation draws the veracity of the digital image into question, this research is concerned with the evidencing of existing forms rather than the process of image creation.

constituent of the 'good', while not erased completely, is decentralised, and the defiance of the human trace is accepted both within and beyond the spatial design disciplines as ideal.

While such depictions of habitable space are presented in contrast to the actuality of living, the ubiquity of such images, combined with mechanisms of legitimate production and distribution, construct this illogical ideal as rational, normalised depictions of lived space. Stuart Hall describes such legitimising functions as deriving from an institutional apparatus which he explains to be '... forms of power/knowledge that constitute the institutions for example, architecture, regulations, scientific treatises, philosophical statements, laws morals, and so on, and the discourse articulated through all of these' (Hall 1997, 47 in Rose 2007, 174). A statement originating from an authoritative institution is 'likely to be more productive' and therefore more visible 'than one coming from a marginalised social position' (Rose 2007, 166). So the institutional location of a discourse is crucial to understanding the way in which their outputs are rationalised.

In addition, the specific technologies implemented by these institutions to articulate rationale, is relevant. Gillian Rose describes institutional technologies as 'the practical techniques used to practice...power/knowledge' (2007, 175; Foucault 1995). As an example, Rose uses some research on photography by John Tagg, where she explains that 'Foucault's emphasis on institutions and power/knowledge is crucial for understanding the belief that photography pictures the real' (Rose 2007, 175). Such an understanding explains the use of the photograph as an authenticating technique of the ideal spatial depiction as it exists in the institutional location of spatial design, and the publishing industry which enables wider dissemination. Therefore the ideal depiction is presented and accepted to a broad audience as a normalised reality of the present.

Michel Foucault's concern with institutional power, as well as his questioning of the taken for granted social normalisations of the present, provide a line of questioning which can be extended to the conception of the ideal spatial depiction. Foucault states in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, that such naturalised understandings:

must be held in suspense. They must not be rejected definitively, of course, but the tranquillity with which they are accepted must be disturbed; we must show that they do not come about by themselves, but are always the result of a construction the rules of which be known and the justifications of which must be scrutinised...(Foucault 1976a, 25 in Rose 2007, 157).

Lindsay Prior, in *Following in Foucault's Footsteps*, (and admittedly an alternative context), describes these 'constructions' not as accurate reflections of an external world but rather as manifestations of 'the discursive rules and themes that predominate in a particular socio-historical context' the result being a representation of what is understood to exist (Prior 1997, 70, 69). In saying this, Foucault is challenging the discursive assumption that pervades these constructions as neutral positions of communication (Anderson 2003). So, it can be said that the discursive rules and themes define acceptability between the sayable and the visible within specific discourses and create a conditional understanding of the world (Anderson 2003; Kendall and Wickham 1999). It is this series of relations between what can be said and what can be seen, which Ian Hunter describes as knowledge (Kendall and Wickham 1999), and the culmination of the sayable and the visible as the material conditions of thought or 'knowledges' (Hunter in Kendall and Wickham 1999, 35).

The material conditions of thought or knowledge 'package and stabilise the order of things (sic)' thereby providing the means through which the world is viewed, understood and engaged with (Prior 1997, 67). However, they 'do not simply elucidate the world but establish regimes of knowledge and truth that regulate our approach to ourselves, each other and our surroundings respectively...' (Anderson 2003, 3). The ideal spatial depiction is therefore the product of what is thought to be true. While the material conditions function to stabilise, the relation between the sayable and the visible is unstable (Kendall and Wickham 1999), so part of Foucault's technique involves tracing alterations to the rules and themes of the sayable and the visible in order to understand how an alternate 'image of reality' has been created (Prior 1997, 67).

Further, the domination of particular visual orders, results in that which is unable to be seen. Rose uses Hal Foster's explanation of the way in which visualities structure what can and can't be seen: 'how we see, how we are able, allowed or made to see, and how we see this seeing and the unseeing therein' (Foster, 1988, ix in Rose 2007, 2). Rose explains that 'Absences can be as productive as explicit naming; *invisibility* can have just as powerful effects as visibility' (Rose 2007, 64). In other words, the absence of any trace of habitation, is just as productive in its promotion of a particular rationale, as its positive image. This leads to a line of questioning from Foucault's *Mental Illness and Psychology*, where analyst Niels Akerstrom Anderson asks: 'How does our society express itself in those morbid forms in which it refuses to recognise itself?' (Anderson 2003, 3; Foucault 1976b)

On this trajectory, while the institutions of the design related publishing industries and pure disciplines will not allow traces of human life to intrude their two dimensional formations, other institutional apparatuses will, and numerous examples are to be found in literature, art and film, which provide alternate images of reality. Such 'morbid forms' provide a means of countering the normative. Further, given that discourses have the ability to take/provide statements from/to alternative discourses (Kendall and Wickham 1999), contrasts enable ideality in the spatial environment to be both diagnosed and extended. This potential expansion would enable the interior to assume a transformative state of becoming.

In a similar way, visual culture utilizes a process of negative differentiation as a means of establishing social difference whereby '...civility and bourgeois respectability need the stereotypical unruly 'others' – be they drunks or cultural minorities or anyone else positioned outside phantasmatic norms – to define non-existent codes of what constitutes 'acceptable' behaviour' (Shohat and Stam 2002, 55). This otherness can be extended beyond subjection, to the evidencing of habitation in spatial depiction, remembering that in this context, the positional extreme of ideality is constitutive of the norm.

An example of the 'acceptable' evidencing of habitation, obvious for the media frenzy generated at the time, is Tracey Emin's *My Bed*. The installation is composed of Emin's unmade bed 'complete with dirty sheets and detritus' (Tate 2012, Line 3). In this work, traces of the most private human experiences are evidenced on and by the bed she did not leave for several days during a period of depression (Emin 2005). The innately personal qualities of this public display are emphasised by the site of the bed itself, an object ordinarily reserved for private rooms and intimacy. The work was highly publicised for its shock value, and was met with misunderstanding and public derision. Emin speaks of cleaners and visitors attempting to 'clean up' the refuse constituent of the installation (Emin 2005). Despite this, the installation was legitimised by its inclusion within the institutional location of the gallery context, and was further justified by the nomination and subsequent short listing for the 1999 Turner Prize.

A further example of the un-sayable, can be found in Sartre's epistolary novel *Nausea*, where the idea of the 'perfect moment' is introduced. A perfect moment is achieved when all combined qualities of environment and social interaction are deemed *ideal*. Perfect moments depend on the very personal traces present day spatial depictions are so cautious to eradicate. The protagonist's lover Anny, would go to great preparatory lengths to ensure the possible eventuation of perfect moments at any given time or place. In this illustration, the contrast is expressed in terms of a negation:

How bare this room is! Before, Anny always used to carry an immense trunk full of shawls, turbans, mantillas, Japanese masks, pictures of Epinal. Hardly arrived at an hotel – even if it is only for one night - than her first job is to open this trunk and take out all her wealth which she hangs on the walls, on lamps, spreads over tables or the floors, following a changeable and complicated order; in less than thirty minutes the dullest room became invested with a heavy, sensual, almost intolerable personality. Perhaps the trunk got lost – or stayed in the check room...This cold room with the door half-open on the bathroom has something sinister about it. It looks like - only sadder and more luxurious - like my room in Bouville...(Sartre 1962, 183).

The creation of Anny's ideal spatial environment, suited to perfect moments, involves the ritualistic surrounding of her room with personal belongings, adornments and self-expressions. Anny arranges her possessions in a particular way. The room becomes her place. The resulting 'intolerable personality' imbued in the room is precisely the element that the sterile, ideal interior image will not allow, and their absence in the hotel room of this description results in a cold, sad atmosphere.

Further contrasts can be found in historically located texts and images. In *Critical and Effective Histories: Foucault's Methods and Historical Sociology*, Mitchel Dean explains that in questioning the taken-for-granted present, present reality can be 'illuminated' by using 'historical resources to reflect upon the contingency, singularity, interconnections, and potentialities of the diverse trajectories of those elements which compose present social arrangements and experience' (Dean 1994, 20, 21). In this way, history can function as a tool, and is designed to 'make intelligible possibilities in the present' (Dean 1994, 21). To do this, Foucault's use of history challenges existing methodological truth and rationality (Dean 1994; Kendall and Wickham 1999; Anderson 2003; Jose 1998), in favour of 'methodologies adequate to the problems of division, dispersion and difference within histories...' (Dean 1994, 21).

For example, in *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir discusses the significance of personal possessions to the creation of both the ideal home and self in the context of 1950's French society where 'decorations will also provide an expression of her personality; she is the one who has chosen, made, hunted out furnishings and knick-knacks, who has arranged them in accordance with an aesthetic principal in which regard for symmetry is usually an important element...' (de Beauvoir 1971, 450). In this passage, de Beauvoir attributes the home as a primary indicator of personal style, social status and standard of living which in turn provides a demonstration of a woman's 'truest self' (de Beauvoir 1971).

In contrast, Charles Rice begins *The Emergence of the Interior* with a passage from Walter Benjamin's Arcade Project, which describes the apparent need for the bourgeois to compensate for the 'absence of any trace of private life in the big city', (Benjamin in Rice 2007, 9; 2005, 286) and would do so by filling their private apartments with trinkets and personal items. As a counter to this public anonymity, the private apartment setting as a medium for the expression of his 'true person', takes on a greater significance. His existence is asserted through his possessions and his preference for fabrics which 'preserve the imprint of all contact' so as 'not to allow the traces of his everyday objects and accessories to get lost' (Rice 2007, 9;

2005, 286). While de Beauvoir and Benjamin both identify the significance of the setting as a mode of self presentation and also as a means to assert subjective existence through material possessions, their views diverge in their treatment of the traces of everyday living. While Benjamin expresses a desire to preserve the traces, de Beauvoir draws the analogy between the bodily self and the maintenance of home where '...keeping attractive implies – like the upkeep of a home – a struggle against duration; for her body also is an object that deteriorates with time' (de Beauvoir 1971, 535). Hence, the war between the ideal body and age, and more importantly to this argument, maintaining the ideal home and everyday living is waged.

These examples introduce alternate acceptable mediums for the expression of habitation via the institutions of art and literature, as well as the tool of the historical 'event' (Foucault 1976a), through which it may be possible to trace the transforming attitudes towards habitation and its evidencing. It is via such oppositions, that discourse allows the space for new possibilities of concept and metaphor to be exchanged via the rules particular of discourse (Henriques et al 1984, 105-106 in Kendall and Wickham 1999, 41), thereby initiating a shift in state from being to becoming. Therefore, discursive statements need to situate themselves within a conceptual network which allows the possibility of further statements by transmutation or extension of possible formulations that the concept 'implicitly or explicitly' refers to (Anderson 2003, 11). This would further enable extensions to the acceptable institutional technologies used to practice the shifting forms of power/ knowledge. Contrary to the connotation, statements are not limited to the verbal, they extend to any material condition of thought or knowledge. For this reason sources may derive from photographs, fine arts, lifestyle magazines, industry journals, film, conceptual design, three dimensional space, as well as fictional and non-fictional literature.

So this ability of discourses to be articulated via diverse modes as well as between discourses suggests that intertextuality becomes important to the understanding of discourse (Rose 2007) as well as to the 'web of intertextuality' through which the material conditions of knowledge are embedded (Rose 2007, 169). Rose explains that an 'eclecticism is demanded by the intertextuality of discourse, and Green seconds that discourse is 'a coherent pattern of statements across a range of archives and sites' (Green 1990, 3 in Rose 2007, 149).

The analytical field of discourse extends to the body of compiled statements in their contextualised historical dispersion (Anderson 2003). The historical archive of this discourse then becomes essential as it is that which has produced the relation between 'what is said, and what can be seen in a set of social arrangements: in the conduct of a Foucaultian archaeology, one finds out something about the visible in 'opening up' statements and something about the statement in 'opening up visibilities'....statements and visibilities mutually condition each other' (Kendall and Wickham 1999, 25). It is not until the archive has been assembled that an analysis of discursive formations (regularity of dispersions over time, among the irregular dispersions of statements), can take place (Anderson 2003). 'Sometimes Foucault refers to this type of work as uncovering the conditions of possibility for a knowledge or an historical event' (Kendall and Wickham 1999, 37). Uncovering the conditions of possibility of a discourse, is essential for understanding the conditions through which it is possible to counter the established truth or norm, in turn allowing the opportunity for habitation to become acceptably expressed in the context of the spatial design disciplines.

The intention of this paper has been to destabilise the unquestioned acceptance of the ideal spatial depiction, and to argue the possibility for the acceptable expression of habitation within the spatial design disciplines. These ideas have been explored by a discussion of the rationalising mediums of institutional power and the rules of discursive formation. The possibility for change in the interior depiction has been discussed as a consequence of the transformative nature of discourse, simultaneously enabling

the possibility for the acceptable expression of habitation with the depiction of space internal to the discourse of Interior Design. Such possibilities destabilise the present normalisations, and enable a potential shift from an unchallengeable state of being, to a transitory state of becoming. The successful outcome of such a pursuit has the capacity to extend existing knowledge, and understandings of the spatial design disciplines by enabling a shift in normalised perceptions and projections of the built environment via spatial depiction.

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