Interior Economies: Money, markets, labour, politics, culture, land, people, objects, desire and space (not always in that order)

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"I am an economist, an economist who believes that the future economy will be an economy of quality." 1

Cultural economist, publisher and research academic Harry Hillman-Chartrand wrote these bold and inspiring words in 1987. Given the current volatile and fragile state of local and global economies twenty-five years later, these words beg critical reflection. Has this future economy of quality come to bear? If so, how might interior design be implicated?

Hillman-Chartrand argued that the arts would be the main driver of this future economy, the arts consisting of three distinct yet interrelated sectors: the fine arts (a form of pure research that equates ‘art for art’s sake’ with ‘knowledge for knowledge’s sake’); the commercial arts (an art that dwells on profit-making); and the amateur arts (a recreational or leisure activity that enables a citizen to actualise her/his creative potential and appreciate life more fully). 2 Hillman-Chartrand’s notion of an ‘arts industry’ is now familiar; it forms the cornerstone of what is understood as either ‘the creative industries’, ‘the cultural industries’ or ‘the creative economy’ and depending on which notion of an ‘arts industry’ is now familiar; it forms the cornerstone of what is understood as either ‘the creative industries’, ‘the cultural industries’ or ‘the creative economy’ and depending on which expert one consults, consists of advertising, architecture, art, crafts, design, fashion, film, music, performing and visual arts, publishing, software, sound, toys and games, TV and radio, and video games. This amalgam of professional practices, university programmes, research, manufacturing and government-driven incentives capitalise on the value of innovation and entrepreneurship. 3

The interiors that designers create are also high-value receptacles for the products of this economy; they promote and engender ‘lifestyle’. While the building industry, in particular residential construction and residential real estate sales, are primary indexes for economic growth in most developed countries, interior renovation and home decoration have continued to prosper despite the recent world-wide recession; it seems that the trend sways away from large risk-taking investment towards a generally more conservative and cautious consumer response to economic upheaval. Retro-fitting, and refurbishing encapsulate the original meaning of the Greek term ‘oikos’, (translated as the management of the domestic household) and represent thriving import and export markets as well as local trades and skill-based industries such as painters, wallpaper hangers, recycled furniture and pop-shops and home repair craftspeople. Though tenuous at times, life goes on and so does the penchant for interior lifestyle.

Hillman-Chartrand’s call to replace ‘post-industrial’ sensibilities of economy with ‘post-modern’ has been supplanted by a contemporary phase of modernity that Lash and Urry call ‘disorganised capitalism’. 4 They signal that ‘a new temporal and spatial playing field is produced in which the established forms of capital: money, productive capital, commodities (all objects) and labour (subjects), all circulate across increasing distance with greater velocity. The increasing number of objects circulating and being consumed has resulted in the inability of people adequately to attach meaning to them, before either the meanings or the objects are transformed.’ 5 Structuralist conceptions of social processes are shown to be insufficient at addressing the effective subjectivity of the transformations occurring between people, objects and places. In the context of social science, interior designers might find resonance with the emphasis that Lash and Urry place on ‘aesthetic reflexivity’ where people are actively involved in shaping and being shaped by both the goods and services that they consume. These authors call this relational component ‘new communities’, groups of people forming temporal networks for the sake of shared identity and purpose. Such communities persist through the flow of information and communication. ‘It is the use and exchange of meaning in such flows that allow self-interpretation relative to social and spatial/temporal practices.’ 6

Lash and Urry offer interior design a notion of economy that hastes a relational perspective to a fluctuating and conditional condition of inhabitation. Though their main goal is to reconceptualise the transformation of meaning production in people-to-people (services) and people-to-objects (goods) relationships, their emphasis on the social interface between these constituents highlights the concerns of this guest-edited issue of the IDEA JOURNAL, principally how interior design as a professional (creative industry) practice and an interior engages or produces economies. The use of the plural form of economy here is intentional, for in the space of 129 pages, this issue expands upon the normative definition of economics as ‘the study of labor, land, and investments, of money, income, and production, and of taxes and government expenditures.’ 7

Though this is an accurate description of economy, this definition could be interpreted as something that happens outside of interiors, as if interiors are still and merely regarded as isolated, protected, private and cellular nineteenth-century bourgeois domestic home environments, havens from the external urban chaos or twenty-first-century industry and technologies, transport and...
communication. While such vantage points have been significantly fruitful for developing interior design theory and re-visualizing its histories intellectually, the interior as a conceptual construct is no longer only equated with ‘home’, no longer a singular idea nor it is wrapped in cotton-wool; it is as permeable to external infiltrations as it is the centre stage for cultural violence; the scene of political contestation\(^{10,11}\) and the surface of industrial forces operating at a mega-scale.\(^{12}\) Like interiors, notions of material culture and capitalism have expanded to consider economies as social processes and cultural practices rather than as a unitary economic logic.\(^{13}\)

With the original call for papers and visual essays to Interior Economies, I sought to draw out speculative conversations around interior design’s interface with emergent notions of economy both within and outside of its discipline boundaries. It was meant as a provocation to engage forthrightly with contemporary issues and to address the economic factors that are so emphatically present in all forms of interior design practice. As such, this issue was envisioned as a place where topics such as ergonomics, construction specifications and performance based codes might be considered in light of contemporary philosophy on the body, or spatial efficiency models might be challenged by sustainable ‘slow’ movements, or new notions of inhabitation might emerge out of an analysis of collaborative ‘open-source’ and ‘open-plan’ workplace environments. What an opportunity to critically interrogate Martha Stewart’s website, IKEA, and the home shopping channel in light of contemporary philosophy on the body, or spatial efficiency models might be challenged.

As is normally the case for edited volumes, especially those generated by open calls and sustainable ‘open-source’ and ‘open-plan’ workplace environments. What an opportunity to critically interrogate Martha Stewart’s website, IKEA, and the home shopping channel in light of the plethora of bespoke or hand-made furniture design companies and sustainable interior design practitioners. As a designer infusing her practice with new materialist forms of feminism, I am not sure I will ever regard appliances the same way again.

The next contribution is an extended visual essay framed as a conversation between New Zealand photographer Wayne Barrar and myself, a conversation that entertains some of the more poignant incentives and context to Barrar’s recent touring exhibition An Expanding Subterra. As Barrar speaks to the experience of locating, framing and situating these works within his photographic practice, I probe notions of ground and construction geometries, in general, an application of a landscape architect’s concept of cut and fill to the industrial production of interior space. Barrar’s sublime images serve my cause to think of interiors well beyond the domestic realm; they bring to the fore complex issues of spatial navigation, the relationship between sustainability and comfort and culturally embedded values and myths around underground space. The words ‘uncanny’ and ‘un-homely’ do not begin to describe these forays into interior exigency. I am aware of only two other works that come equally close to turning the interior inside out as the Subterra project does: the completely synthetic interior environments that Constance Adams designed for NASA’s Mars station\(^{14}\) and Biosphere 2 in Arizona, USA.\(^{15}\) Led by Barrar’s project in relation to these two examples, I am tempted to consider the synapse between economies and ecologies, a side track that would serve our discussion towards so-called natural and artificial systems – of thought, of material processes, of growth and production – well beyond the scope of this introduction.

Teressa Stoppani’s essay dwells upon dust and the act of dusting. I particularly appreciate her assertion that the new dusting appliance not only removes dust but, participating in the dynamics of the mediatic and machinic centre-less interior, it sucks up (together with dust), all familiar connotations of domesticity. Vacuumed, the interior is fragmented, multiplied and centrifugally dispersed, made permeable and exposed it is no longer separable from world events.\(^{16}\) Wielding a dry humour, Stoppani’s text migrates between ancient myth, popular culture advertising, film and visual art to confirm dust’s penchant to recur and the act of dusting to be almost more Sisyphean than rolling a large boulder uphill. As a designer infusing her practice with new materialist forms of feminism, I am not sure I will ever regard appliances the same way again.

Nuttinee Karnchanaporn contributes an essay that cuts to the core of an interior economy related to how size matters. Drawing our attention to the traditions of house dwelling compared to new urban apartment living in contemporary metropolis Bangkok, Karnchanaporn exposes the manner in which developer-driven housing design meets the financial imperatives for young city dwellers at the cost of valued cultural habits around dining, social life and privacy. The text and images represent a conscientious study informed by data analysis and interviews that bring a new dimension to the western European adage Tiss is more.\(^{17}\) In stark contrast, Jacqueline McIntosh and John Gray provide an in-depth analysis of conjoined housing in New Zealand and Australia. Their essay puts forward a new concept of economy privileging concepts of sharing manifest in small yet significant shifts in interior planning and detailing. The sensitivity they lend to this topic is made more evident in the images of their own design practice as they demonstrate an ethical commitment to sharing as a desirable and economic practice that both reduces total housing costs...
as it reduces total constructions and promotes spatial interaction of occupants—two forms of economy supporting an increase in an overall quality of life.

As Karnchanaporn speaks to the density and complexity of urban living and McIntosh and Gray are focused on how housing surfaces, walls, services and facilities can be used in common as a mode of living sustainably, Emma Gieben-Gamal and Juliette MacDonald test some of the time-space continuums enabled by mobile technology in particular, how the laptop operates to situate one’s office, or rather, work place, as a nomadic interior. Their auto-ethnographic research confirms the pervasiveness of this technology towards not only our sense of space and place but also as a tool where time and space are shared out of convenience; where work never ends but one is always on the move.

I am struck by the response that Sara Lee’s essay offers to Gieben-Gamal and MacDonald. Her watercolour paintings resurrect her grandmother’s house interior. As I peruse these images I am acutely aware of the time and labour invested to lay down the veils of coloured washes, of waiting for them to dry before proceeding with the next layer of the intuition required to know when to stop and when to continue. Lee uses the traditional Taiwanese lunch called a bento as a means to metaphorically organize her memories of the house interior, and like the lunch box, her recollections of the interior are portrayed as saturated and multi-layered drawings. I would like to suggest that this visual essay provides evidence of a process that reveals new knowledge and awareness in its own making. In this case it is slow, careful and methodical. Perhaps this is an economy of resistance to the frenetic pace of modern interiors?

Outlining a pedagogical tool for interior designers, Fátima Pombo, Wouter Bervoets and Hilde Heynen have crafted a three part text, each part reflecting, interpreting or analyzing Edward Hopper’s 1957 painting ‘Western Hotel’. This group of authors provide an overview of three theoretical frameworks. In the space of the text, they demonstrate each framework’s dominant orientation and its impact on research methodology. The lesson promoted here is that every research question deserves an appropriate framework with which to initiate the inquiry—choose and use your research tools wisely, i.e. economically.

I too believe that the future economy will be one of quality, but perhaps for very different reasons than put forward by Harry Hillman-Chartrand. While each essay in Interior Economies speaks to interiors and commodities, frugality, efficiency, minimum standards, cultural traditions, labour, gender, spatial politics, or time and cost savings, they each do so as a means to uphold or tease out an issue or question pivotal to well-being, a resoundingly qualitative interior condition that is not always measured in dollars or meters or minutes, but is inextricably connected to creativity (whether it is exploited as an industry or not) and cognizant of the pleasure that comes with experiencing designed environments (despite or inspite of the consumptive objects they engender).

NOTES

9. For example see Beatric Colomina’s book Domesticity at War, (Cambridge MIT Press, 2007)
10. For example see Julianne Preston’s conference paper “Into After” at IDEA Conference Interior Space in Other Places, Brisbane, Australia. (http://www.idea-edu.com/Symposiums/2010-Interior-Space-in-Other-Places)
11. For example, see in this issue the visual essay by Preston and Barrar.
14. For an introduction to Constance Adams’ works, see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3vXWK1EQJOI (Accessed 2 January 2012)
15. See http://www.2science.org/ for an overview of Biosphere2