Book Review

Life from the Inside: Perspectives on Social Sustainability & Interior Architecture

Curtin University Interior Architecture Publication Series, Paper and Pencil Press, 2011

Reviewed by Amanda Yates,

Life from the inside: Perspectives on social sustainability and interior architecture is a a unique contribution to the interior architecture and design discipline. Featuring a collection of essays on the relationship between design and sustainability, the book filters the potentially broad sustainability discourse through a concern with the social. Social sustainability is understood here as an anthropocentric and future-focused condition that sustains social capital and specificity through the generations. The text focuses on how people live in their built environments and how one might practice or 'do' collaborative design processes. Interior architecture is established here as the design of the interface between environment and people, and more radically as a facilitator of fundamental needs and of social justice.

Three key aspects of social sustainability – community engagement, social justice and cultural heritage – structure the book. While most of the chapters are compelling and well researched there are a few which seem underdeveloped – perhaps reflective of the paucity of work in this area. The projects presented within the text are fascinating models of the various potential approaches available within an ethical design practice. As such the book certainly contributes to the growing number of publications on collaborative and ethical design processes and is nicely differentiated by its distinctive focus on the interior.

The first section presents community engagement as a multi-directional and iterative process where designers and an often disparate and diverse group of citizen-designers work in relation to specific needs and attributes. Marina Lommerse's chapter, 'Working together: interior architecture
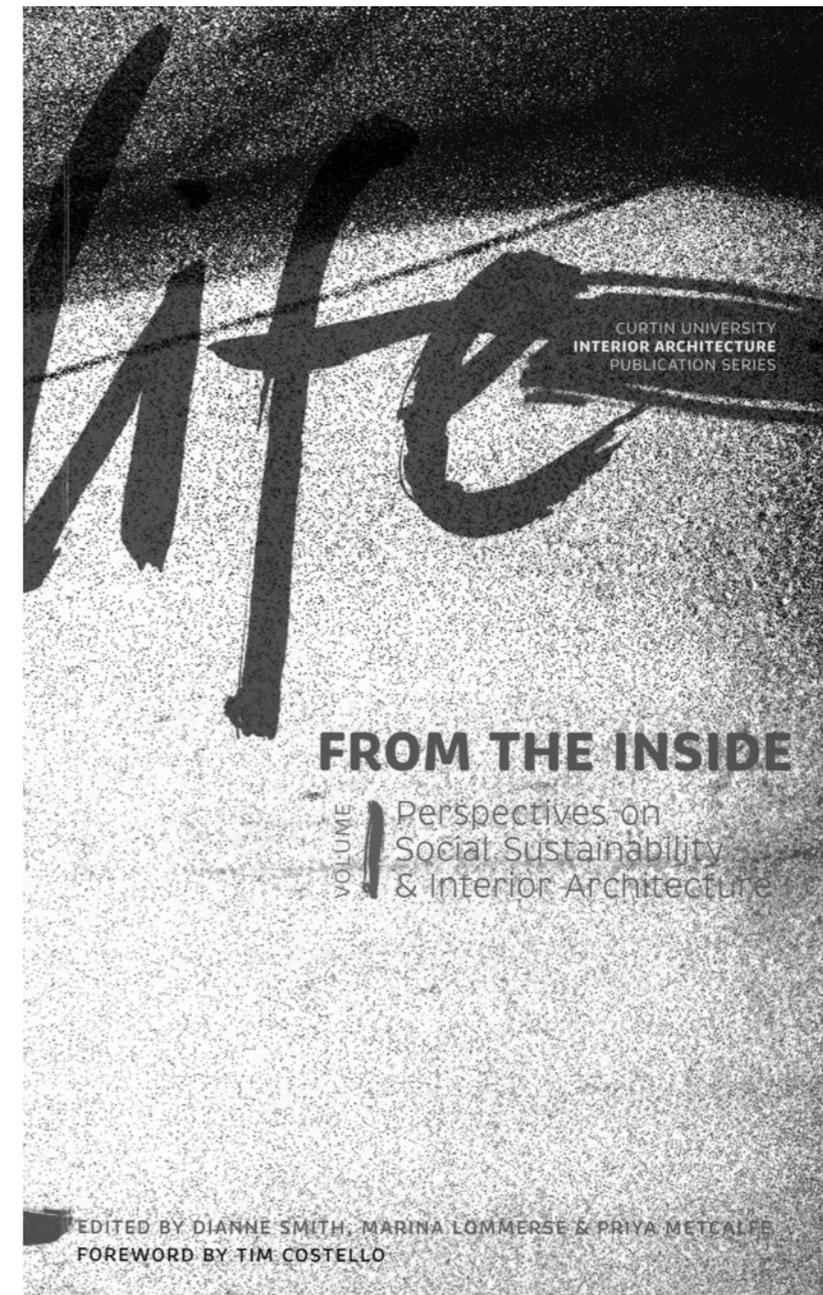
creating with the community," presents case studies and principles for community engagement. Lommerse emphasises that all communities are different, with unique conditions and relationships. She explores how to engage and the benefits of that engagement. Lommerse further filters the term community, defining specific communities of place, of practice, or identity. She establishes that community engagement is enhanced by a commitment to reciprocity, continuity and collaboration on the part of all participants. The chapter concludes with a review of a range of case studies and discusses how design thinking, holistic and diverse systems thinking, and community engagement can address complex social, environmental and economic issues for the benefit of communities.

'More than bricks and mortar: lessons in design and world citizenship' by Kelly Beaverford addresses a single case study of design education for engagement. The *Service Learning in the Global Community* course, run by the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Manitoba, gives students a 6-week design-build experience in rural communities of Turkey, Uganda or Ghana. Inter-cultural exchange is central to the pedagogical aims of the course, this achieved through intensive project-based interaction with local communities and community leaders. Design is pursued as a collaborative process informed by the distinct particularities of social, economic and cultural context. A principle of reciprocity underpins the projects where all engaged learn from mutual exchanges and encounters which are transdisciplinary, transcultural and intergenerational.

In the second section of the book, focused on social justice the editors assert the need to consider issues of social equity and quality of life in and through design. Dianne Smith's chapter, "Interiors can address Social Justice: fact or fiction," establishes a working definition of Social Justice as a concern with basic human rights including the right to security, shelter and comfort. Overviewing national and international design associations Smith demonstrates that socially responsible design is not understood as core professional practice in interior design. Reviewing the practice of interior designers she finds that many social equity projects are developed within educational institutions or for

research. Smith ends the chapter with a challenging call to move beyond design that reinforces inequities, design for profit or for consumption by embedding socially responsible principles within interior architecture practice, educational and professional bodies.

The following chapters, 'Interior voices: commentary and reflection', by Jill Pable and Lisa Waxmas, [p86] 'Interior design by expediency', by Rodney Harber and Angela Buckland, both provide detailed analysis of project based socially responsible design. 'Interior voices' focuses on a low-income housing project that the authors are currently working on with the Florida Housing Finance Corporation. They employ an adapted environmental psychology model to develop design recommendations for housing for the homeless, veterans and the elderly. By addressing concepts such as well-being, community building, place-making and privacy the authors aim to extend the concept of liveability from the large scale of the neighbourhood to the interior. 'Interior design by expediency' is a detailed and moving account of the living conditions of South African migratory workers. Micro-habitats are formed around the footprint of a bed, and in some instances, the space below which is tightly packed with work items and reminders of home. The potential to make significant change through innovative and small-scaled design interventions is clear and compelling. An endnote advises that Harber spent much of his early years in a hostel, this perhaps accounts for the affect of the chapter.

Paul Memmott's essay 'Inside the remote-area Aboriginal house' unpacks cultural differences in the experience and making of interiority. Deeply researched the paper describes the way that Aboriginal space is formed through and as relationships rather than by programmatic functions as in the West. Memmott emphasises how socially responsive design in this context requires a understanding of Aboriginal practices and specific kinship group relationships: it is particularly interesting that the interior, in this culture, is a weather-activated spatial form most often used in poor weather only. 'Too 'nice' to be socially responsible: reflections of a Danish interior practitioner,' by Marianne Frandsen, asks why socially responsible design in Copenhagen is predominantly the area of artists rather than interior architects. Frandsen discusses

two case studies, one by an artist, the second by artists and an interior architect. Thomas Poulsen and Kenneth Balfelt were commissioned to re-vitalise the Home for Men, a shelter in Copenhagen. The artists aimed to form 'social space' as a result of their interventions in physical space and manipulation of program – control spaces like reception and attendant's offices were removed. The intervention also acted as a provocation to the Danish State to do more to support the users. The second project involved the development of an art and design strategy for a new hospital as part of an Evidence Based Design strategy to foster wellbeing through art and design.

The cultural heritage section explores how the built environment can embed or embody specific social qualities. Two historic buildings are discussed in the two chapters of this section – both are presented as material reminders of particular social relations and practices. In 'Cultural heritage practice through socially sustainable adaptive re-use of industrial buildings: a Western Australia narrative' Priya Metcalfe argues that the ongoing usage or adaptive reuse of heritage buildings is a measure of the sustainability of a place. Metcalfe discusses the redevelopment of the Midland Railway Workshops in Perth and its shift from an industrial site to a mixed commercial and residential zone for largely high-income tenants. Arguing the compromise inherent in the gentrification process Metcalfe suggests that this is preferable to the permanent loss of the complex: while one measure of social sustainability is reduced, another, the histories, memories and practices embedded in the building fabric, remains. Penny Sparke's chapter, 'Ambiguity and permeability in historic modern interiors: a challenge for Cultural Heritage and social sustainability' establishes the interior as a socio-cultural site whose usage and meaning is deeply affected by issues such as gender and class. The distinction between private or domestic space and public or non-domestic space remains the common way that people distinguish between interior types – Spark's essay focuses on how the gendered visual, spatial and material language of domesticity can be expressed in modern restoration-conservation projects. She notes the degree to which spatial patterns constantly change, illustrating this through reference to inwards focused Victorian interiors and exterior oriented Modernist interiors.

Social sustainability here is measured in part through the ability to maintain or reference historically specific spatial registers that echo past social relationships.

With a foreword written by Tim Costello, the Chief Executive of World Vision Australia, *Life from the Inside* connects the design of interiors with social justice issues and opens itself to a wider audience than the design community alone. The book establishes the interior architecture discipline's expertise in the theory and practice of the 'person-environment relationshop' and asks, given this central competency, why the discipline is not leading in social sustainability. The editors call for systemic change in the way interior architecture is theorised and practiced: rather than design for design's sake they assert the need to practice socially responsible design that considers issues of justice and is developed through community engagement. Considered in relation to current practice this is indeed a radical call and a timely one. *Life from the Inside* outlines a compelling argument for socially responsible design and signals key areas for action and engagement in order to build an ethical interior architecture practice.