Finding a space for the practice of interior design

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ABSTRACT

Despite recent intensity in discourse surrounding the definition and territory of interior design as a practice and a field of study in professional and academic forums around the world, little consideration has been given to the process and outcomes of contemporary interior design practice, and few analyses of it may (or may not) contribute to interior design’s persistent discussions of contested definition of identity and territory. This paper seeks to find a position within the current literature that allows justifiable discussion of contemporary interior design practice.

During the last four years an unprecedented amount of discussion has been generated in academic and professional forums concerning the territory of interior design as a practice and a field of study. These have included the 2006 publication of the seminal Interior Design: The State of the Art edited by academics Mark Taylor and Julieanna Reston; the International Federation of Interior Architects/Designers (IFI) Interior Design: the State of Design Festival in Melbourne in 2006. Each of the conferences were based on a similar premise that positioned interior design as a difficult to define discipline that draws upon a broad theory base from sources beyond disciplinary boundaries of design and architecture.

The second part of this paper provides these references, leading to a conclusion that, in the case of contemporary Australian interior design at least, the approach, outcomes and authors of professional practice contribute to the view of interior design as a collaborative and expansive field.

In Intimus Interior Design Theory Reader, Taylor and Preston have researched and collected sixty-nine essays containing interior-related theory unconstrained by disciplinary boundaries and not dominated by architectural conjecture or interior decoration assertion. The absent representation from the interior design field in this interior design reader is, however, telling. Not one text within Intimus was authored by an interior designer or an interior design (educated) academic, and not one text has an interior space designed by an interior designer as its subject. The contents of Intimus illustrate both the expansive and interdisciplinary strengths as an unbounded discipline, yet also fuel its greatest frustration – the inability to identify discipline-specific examples of knowledge and practice. This author has previously argued that interior design disciplinary theory is broad not only because of the nature of interior design as a discipline and a practice that requires and benefits from many multidisciplinary connections, but also because the major group of potential contributors to interior design theory – interior design academics – have intellectual and professional allegiances to other fields. According to a 2008 IFI estimate, only 20% of interior design academics have qualifications in interior design.

As the following review of these positions presented in recent forums will reveal, the discussions of interior design territory rarely make reference to examples of actual interior design practice. The second part of this paper provides these references, leading to a conclusion that, in the case of contemporary Australian interior design at least, the approach, outcomes and authors of professional practice contribute to the view of interior design as a collaborative and expansive field.

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The IFI State of the Art roundtable conference was convened by the then IFI President, Madelene Lester, to explore the definition of Interior Architecture/Design. This seminar aims to bring together professionals and educators from the various parts of the world to explore and discuss the State of the Art in Interior Architecture/Design, and to formulate a directive opinion to fuel the world-wide debate on the position of the profession.

An article by Ellen Klingenbergen of Oslo National Academy of the Arts entitled Interspace was circulated to delegates as a positioning paper prior to the roundtable. Klingenbergen proposed that ‘The interspace – the emptiness in space – is filled with human activity and stories.’ She argued that this notion of an abstract space – the storytelling or the action space – is just as important to the interior design process as is the construction and function of the physical environment. Klingenbergen concluded that this distinct idea of interspace makes it possible to distinguish between interior architecture as a field of study and interior architecture as a profession, and that there is a need for discipline-specific theory (as distinct from general design methods and general design theory) to be developed for interior architecture.

Joo Yun Kim, Vice President of the Korean Society of Interior Architects/Designers (KOSID) and Professor of Interspace Design at Kongik University in Seoul, offered an expansive view when he posed the question: ‘Where are the interior designers?’ Here we can see that the field of interior design is actually a place where many other designers from other fields … can easily approach and work in … doesn’t it seem as though interior design is something you can do without formal interior design education? Perhaps our profession doesn’t really need professional education.’”

Joo Yun Kim proposed expansion of the field of interior design, and
coincidentally offered the term interspace design to identify the field he envisioned for an interior design characterized by convergence to form new hybrid fields of design – a future characterized by interdisciplinary practices and creativity rather than professional competencies.11

Despite Joo Yun Kim’s insight and the provocation of using Klingerberg’s paper for a roundtable convened by the international professional body, the majority of other papers focused on the definition and identity of interior design/interior architecture as a profession, not a field of study. Speakers including David Hanson, President of the North American International Interior Design Association (IID(A), Shashi Caan, previous Chair of Interior Design at Parsons School of Design and now IFI President-Elect, Kees Spanjers, President of the European Council of Interior Architects (E.CIA), and Ronnie Choon, President of the Malaysian Society of Interior Designers (MSID), each took the position that the definition of the field is the definition of the profession. That is, interior design is what interior designers practitioners do; and that there is a need to protect that activity through various levels of licensing and regulation. Shashi Caan’s plea for regulated territory typifies this position: ‘The importance of seeking appropriate legislation in America cannot be underestimated and is critical to the growth and recognition of the discipline … Why do we not own this field, practice it magnificently and dramatically improve it?’12

IFI convened a second roundtable titled Thinking Into the Future in New York in 2007. This roundtable continued the debate about interior design identity, this time with a predetermined focus on education. The proceedings of the roundtable reveal that presented papers and discussion sessions were once again dominated by a profession-led position of how interior design can best educate (and develop knowledge) for practice. In our practice we need to understand what we’re doing. In education and research we need to study why we are doing it.13 Efforts to move beyond this were regularly thwarted by the ever-present problem of definition: ‘I’d like to see us working to understand the discipline of interior design. Do we have a discipline? Is it that we are just here to serve a profession or are we actually building a philosophical theoretical and research theme to provide a foundation for interior design education?’ More pragmatic reasons for a profession-led approach were articulated by others including academic Drew Plunkett, Chair of Interior Design at Glasgow School of Art: ‘We need credibility behind the notion that interior design is a proper discipline in our institutional contexts … The distinct nature of our discipline isn’t hitting home. Yes it’s a very new discipline, but it also has to do with the fact that as a group of educators, we can’t come up with something solid that gives us that kind of authority.’14

The arguments presented at the roundtable either represented the view that the role of the academy is to educate students for professional practice, or the view that the scope of the academy also includes the mandate to educate students for future possibilities beyond current practice. Dr. Luisa Collina, Professor of Design at Politecnico di Milano, provided examples of this approach in her description of the Politecnico’s interior design curriculum that emphasises ‘design as a form of innovation that is related to new meanings, new needs, new values, culture, symbolic values, new context of use, new qualities, and so on’,15 resulting in unprecedented propositions for new types of spaces and opportunities for new uses of spaces. In her summation of the roundtable, invited moderating panel member Suze Attiwill, Chair of the Interior Design/Interior Educators Association (IDEA) and Program Director of Interior Architecture at RMIT, suggested that discussion should centre around a more reciprocal relationship between the profession and academia. ‘To counterpose the expectation of the profession of graduates with the expectation of graduates of the profession. Perhaps the idea of qualities of an educated interior designer is a better way of framing a future roundtable — where education is not viewed as something which is separate from practice and before one enters the profession, but rather is ongoing.’16

Another forum based upon the question of interior design identity was the Thinking Inside The Box conference convened by Interior Forum Scotland in Glasgow in 2007. The proceedings of the conference were disseminated in a publication bearing the name of the conference and the subtitle ‘a reader in interiors for the 21st century’. In their positioning statement for the conference and introductory chapter for the reader, editors and conference convenors Ed Hollis, Alex Milton, Andrew Milligan and Drew Plunkett claim that ‘Within education and practice, interiors occupies multiple identities, yet its historical, theoretical and contextual framework remains patchy, and is frequently contested and unclaimed territory in comparison to those of other disciplines.’17 Reflecting the structure of the conference, the contents of the Thinking Inside the Box reader are divided into sections concerning education, identity, conceptualisation, history, and pedagogy. The section about identity entitled ‘What is interior design?’ contains arguments from the two positions evident at the IFI roundtable: an expansive view of the field (espoused by authors including Chalmers and Close, and Weinthal); and the need for defined territory through some degree of regulation of practice and education (proposed by authors including Caan, Michel and Rudner; and Hannay). Despite revealing a sense of exasperation, Andrew Stone’s analysis of the issue of identity provides an insightful summary: ‘Interior designers maintain a near paranoiac need to define “this is what we do” … “the risk of prescription is that the process can be necessarily reductive, limiting activities to those proffered by a dominant interest.”’18

A significant benefit is that it allows distance and reflection. ‘The edge of the subject is active, offering catalytic opportunities and coalitions.’19 Stone’s paper communicates the need for education to provide future interior design practitioners with the skills and knowledge to “… reflect seriously and confidently on their subject … [and] … to distance themselves from industry demands in order to invest in the subject critically and creatively.”20

One of the papers included in the Thinking Inside The Box reader’s “What Is Interior Design?” section offers a possible way forward in the circular debate over interior design’s identity by a paper entitled ‘What’s In A Canvas’ Suze Attiwill presents an account and analysis of a public debate convened by the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) for the 2006 Victorian State of Design Festival in Australia. Chaired by Attiwill, the event was based on the premise that the potential of a canvas is to collect together significant examples of practice. The emphasis here on practice is not to distinguish from theory but to emphasise activity, i.e. the making of interiors.”21 The forum comprised a panel of seven speakers who were invited to respond to the question ‘Are there ‘canonical’ interiors?’ Attiwill’s account of the event documented the range of examples offered as canvases of interior design by the speakers. Apart from two domestic interiors suggested by Vogue Living editor David Clark (one by visual artist Dale Frank and the other by interior design practice Hedder Phelan and Guthrie) that were the only non-architectural examples,22 the rest were architectural in typology and authored by architects. In response to this, one of the panelists, RMIT Professor Leon van Schaijk, observed that ‘I don’t see how you can claim for interior design works of art are clearly the product of architectural processes and architecture as a professional practice’. The reality of this insight caused Attiwill to acknowledge the ‘active relation between a canvas and a practice and hence the question of interior design as a practice and its manifestations.”23 Attiwill concluded with the realisation that ‘Canons are sites where practitioners, theorists, academics, historians, students, curators can share a platform for discussion and debate … The concept of the canvas could be reinvented from the canvas to canons, becoming multiple and dynamic; as an intensity of a gathering; an assemblage composed of tangled lines; canons of interiorisations where it may be more useful to pose questions in relation to practice – asking “how” as distinct from “what is interior design?” or “who is an interior designer?”’24 As Attiwill herself qualifies,25 such a focus on practice is not to separate it from theory but to concentrate on the process of the doing of interior design – how interior design is made. The identification of this possibility for future discussion could signify a way forward for interior design discourse. The lack of discussion of examples of interior design practice (as either process or outcome) in the significant forums discussed above is glaring. The circular and self-negating arguments of bounded and debate … The concept of the canvas could be reinvented from the canvas to canons, becoming multiple and dynamic; as an intensity of a gathering; an assemblage composed of tangled lines; canons of interiorisations where it may be more useful to pose questions in relation to practice – asking “how” as distinct from “what is interior design?” or “who is an interior designer?”’24 As Attiwill herself qualifies,25 such a focus on practice is not to separate it from theory but to concentrate on the process of the doing of interior design – how interior design is made.

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architects legitimately used in academic institutions and by practitioners in parts of the world where the word designers, deal with projects broadly called “interior architecture”, but even this title cannot be the most kindred discipline – architecture? ‘Today many architects, along with interior and industrial designers, deal with projects broadly called “interior architecture”, but even this title cannot be legitimately used in academic institutions and by practitioners in parts of the world where the word architect is protected.’ Is it due to something even more evasive in our contemporary world, related to what we are presented with through publication and media? Traditional publication has influenced practice and education alike. ‘Shops, and the design of interiors for consumption or for ostentation’ related to what we are presented with through publication and media? Traditional publication has influenced practice and education alike. ‘Shops, and the design of interiors for consumption or for ostentation’.

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The 2007, 2008 and 2009 programs resulted in projects from a total of 250 practices. Of these practices, 30% described themselves as interior design practices, 54% described themselves as architectural practices, and 16% described themselves as other types of practices with ‘exhibition design practice’ and ‘multi-disciplinary design practice’ being the most expansive when compared with the award categories offered by peer judged national award programs. As such, the IDA was conceived as a program that has no disciplinary or professional membership restriction for entry. Since 2007, the IDA entry process has collected data on entering practices. The 2007, 2008 and 2009 programs resulted in projects from a total of 250 practices. Of these practices, 30% described themselves as interior design practices, 54% described themselves as architectural practices, and 16% described themselves as other types of practices with ‘exhibition design practice’ and ‘multi-disciplinary design practice’ being the most common descriptor provided. Despite the fact that it is unlikely that anyone would enter an interior design awards program if they did not want peer and public acknowledgement that they designed interiors, the data clearly indicates that not all projects were (or were solely) the work of those who would necessarily identify themselves as being an interior designer through qualification.

To address the question of ‘what is interior design?’, the IDA award categories are relatively expansive when compared with the award categories offered by peer judged national award programs in other design disciplines. The IDA includes primary award categories of Corporate Interior Design, Retail Interior Design, Public/Institutional Interior Design, Hospitality Interior Design, Installation Design (including gallery and museum exhibitions, installations, set design, event marquees, promotional displays, etc), Residential Interior Design, and Residential Interior Design Adjudicators.

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Decoration. There are also secondary award categories for Ecologically Sustainable Interior Design, Emerging Interior Design Practice, Best of State Awards in Commercial Interior Design and Residential Interior Design, Colour in Residential Interior Design, and Colour in Commercial Interior Design. In 2007 and 2008 categories were offered for Interior Product Design (including furniture) and Interior Textile Design. The Interior Design Awards is not constrained by the anxiety of the ‘who’ or ‘what’ of interior design that appears to pervade professional thinking world-wide. As a peer-judged awards program, its open entry policy and relatively expansive categories aims to acknowledge the creation of interiors, regardless of who does it and to some extent, what it is that is created.

Since 2005, the IDA has recognised outstanding creativity with an overall Premier Award for Interior Design Excellence and Innovation that is judged from the awarded projects in each of the primary categories. It is in the results of this premier award that the expansiveness of the IDA, and interior design practice itself, is most evident. This premier award is bestowed by the jury panels in recognition of how the projects contribute to excellent and innovative interior design practice. Analysis of the six projects that have received this premier award to date reveal much about the ‘how’ of interior design – ‘how is interior design practiced?’ – and add to the discussion of interior design identity in new ways.

The projects that have received the Excellence and Innovation award since the inception of the IDA include an art museum (2004), a residence (2005), a temporary refreshment lounge (2006), a bar (2007), a corporate workplace (2008), and a school (2009). The projects ranged in scale and cost as much as they did in type, with the smallest project being 70sqm ($AUD67,000) and the largest 15,400sqm ($AUD27m).

In 2004 the Ian Potter Centre at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne received the award for Excellence in new ways.

In 2005, the interior design and architecture practice Multiplicity and landscape sculptor Mel Ogden. The project was a complete collaboration from beginning to end with authorship attributed equally to Multiplicity and Ogden in all aspects of the design (Figure 2). The designers, the process they undertook and the final outcome displayed a heightened sense of awareness of responsibility to re-establish the role of a significant building in a small community. The designers were deliberate in their aim to create exterior and interior spaces so that ‘active public and functional services took advantage of the pre-eminent areas of the former church.’ As a result, the project’s greatest contribution lies in its successful maintenance of the public ‘ownership’ of the church while at the same time, transferring its custody to that most private function of domestic habitation. The interior design and the landscape design contributed equally to this through considered creation of spatial elements within and without. Externally the landscaping creates screening for privacy yet maintains characteristics of traditional and recognisable church landscaping. Internally the interior design created spaces for sleeping, ablutions, cooking and communing without compromising the nature of the interior volume, and, in particular, without interrupting the sightlines between the stained glass windows at either end of the church building.

The Solivoid project that received the Excellence and Innovation award in 2006 was the work of the Spatial Design and Research Group at Monash University’s Faculty of Art and Design. Solivoid is a temporary, transportable, inflatable refreshment and resting space for use at large trade-show expositions. As with the 2005 Church Conversion project, Solivoid was the result of multi-disciplinary collaboration. Contributing members of the Spatial Design Research Group including interior design, visual art, architecture, graphic and multimedia designers. The conceptual...
of the mundane, of the outdated, and of the “off the shelf”. Cable reel and having a beer … Dusk celebrates unusual usages of a bar (stools, tables and pendant lights) to simply provide the necessities of a hospitality space – somewhere to sit and drink of place where ‘art is not relegated to something outside and apart from ordinary life, but becomes a characteristic of life at its optimum’. As a resting place for weary trade-show delegates, Solivoid digitally records activity within the space as visitors pass through it or stop to sit on the bubble-wrapped seating, and presents multimedia information and digital art within an interior in a way that is not separated from the experience of the space itself by plasma screens or blank projection walls.

2007 saw the continued tradition of multi-disciplinary authorship of the awarded project. The Dusk bar was designed by Diretribe, a practice of three who collectively hold qualifications in graphic design, architecture and visual art, and describes its work as ‘crossing art and design fields including industrial and graphic design, film, architecture and visual art’. Dusk is a small bar fashioned within an existing building in the popular night-time entertainment precinct of St Kilda in Melbourne. Dusk is a space that makes inspired use of technological cast-offs (cable reels, CDs and CD cases are amongst the selected materials) in surprising and quite beautiful ways as the ubiquitous ‘designed’ elements of a bar (stools, tables and pendant lights) to simply provide the necessities of a hospitality space – somewhere to sit and drink (Figure 4). The contribution of this project is perhaps no better demonstrated within an existing building in the popular night-time entertainment precinct of St Kilda in Melbourne. Dusk is a space that makes inspired use of technological cast-offs (cable reels, CDs and CD cases are amongst the selected materials) in surprising and quite beautiful ways as the ubiquitous ‘designed’ elements of a bar (stools, tables and pendant lights) to simply provide the necessities of a hospitality space – somewhere to sit and drink (Figure 4). The contribution of this project is perhaps no better demonstrated.

The most recent award for Excellence and Innovation was made in the 2009 IDA program and was bestowed upon the Melbourne Grammar School project by John Wardle Architects. The project comprised a new school entry, library, lecture and seminar spaces, three laboratories, a commercial kitchen, function rooms, and a cafe that is open to the public (Figure 5). As a physical entity resulting from functional analysis, facilities and space planning, material and detailing strategy, allied with selected and custom designed furniture, fittings and equipment, BVN’s interior both demonstrates and enables the operation of Santos’ corporate culture and business success. The workplace supports the free flow of knowledge, faster collaboration and provides for visible, open leadership, all contributing to improved productivity in an industry that is characterised by rapid technological developments and expeditious decision making. The project reveals the breadth of mainstream commercial interior design practice and the multitude of complex considerations that needs to be addressed when designing spaces for the people that comprise these enormous global corporations. The overwhelming contribution of this project is in its demonstration of the direct and indirect value that interior design can bring to business in relation to corporate identity and culture, workforce efficiency, flexibility and productivity, human resources recruitment and employee retention and satisfaction through the physical environment.

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represents a significant shift in institutional design, with the interior of the new building made visible to the street and therefore the community. Another in a long line of highly awarded education projects by the practice that are characterised by revealing the activity within, the interior is palpably evident from the outside and there is seamlessness from exterior to interior to exterior. The project succeeds in not only ‘orienting ... students of how interior design is practised, as opposed to arguments contemporary practice and the contemporary world. All are confident and critical in the context of design itself, and some use the interior to achieve organisational or budgets, some are the result of academic and applied research, and permanence, some are the result of hybrid practices or in—

I extend the boundaries of practice. The projects are not all authored by individuals who have qualifications in interior design, nor do they represent a specific band of practice methodology or project. In fact, as a collection (possibly a collection of canons) they extend the boundaries of practice. Some transcend enclosure and permanence, some are the result of hybrid practices or in—

22. The speakers were Cameron Bruhn, then editor of design journal Architect; Peter Geyer, director of interior design practice Geyer; David Clark, editor of residential interiors magazine Vogue Living Elias Diannes, graduate interior designer; Leon van Schaik, Professor of Architecture at RMIT; Caroline Vara, interior design PhD student; and Andrew Madanize, editor of interior design journal (inside) and architecture journal Architectural Review Australia.
27. Cys, Fabianis, 131.
33. Interior Design Awards (About Awards): <http://www.interiordesignawards.com.au> (accessed on 20 March, 2009). The IDA is a partnership between the professional body that represents designers in Australia, the Design Institute of Australia Australian-owned design publisher Architecture Media’s interior design journal Artichoke; and international media company DMG/World Media’s annual Australian interior design exhibition, designEX.
35. For example, the Australian Institute of Architects’ national architecture awards and the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects’ national landscape architecture awards.
40. Dimitrije director Campbell Drake, personal communication with author; 6 June, 2008.
42. Bgl/Voller Nield Architecture, 2008 Interior Design Awards entry in the Corporate Interior Design category Santos Centre.