

# Towards an Interior History

Suzie Attiwill, RMIT University, Australia

**Abstract:** *An interior history as a concept brings together history and interior design with a particular emphasis on addressing the spatial and temporal qualities that are implicit in both practices. Titled 'Towards an Interior History', this paper focuses on a process of making, hence the word 'towards' an interior history. It is not yet in a position to define what an interior history is – to answer the question 'what is an interior history?' – and may never be. By the end of the paper, it is hoped that questions such as 'How does an interior history work?' 'How does it function?' will be understood as more useful to pose. Why? Because dominant models of history and interior design have produced particular kinds of histories of interior design – ones which privilege the visual, hence objects and permanent architectural elements, as well as structures of enclosure and containment. An interior history as a concept celebrates the role of history in the production of the new and seeks to respond to current forces emerging in the design of interiors – for example, temporality, movement, change, encounters. The position here is not one of criticism and a quest for a better history, an attempt to re-write the past in order to re-right. The term 'inter-story' – formed from a conjunction between interior and history – is introduced as a technique for re-thinking history and interior design and as an approach to be taken up in a movement towards an interior history in the making of an interior history.*

**Keywords:** *interior, history, inter-story*

## Introduction

An interior history is, at this stage, a concept that is in the process of taking shape. The process involves questioning the history of interior design and rethinking the disciplines of history and interior design with a particular emphasis on addressing the spatial and temporal qualities that are implicit in both practices. In the conjunction between interior and history different possibilities emerge leading to an interior history. Titled 'Towards an interior history', this paper presents the making of this concept. It will not attempt to exemplify what this concept produces so much as open up the possibility of thinking differently, and provide some tools and techniques by collecting together ideas and methods useful in its making. In this sense, this paper is 'a box of tools'. This analogy is taken from the writings of the philosopher Gilles Deleuze. He goes on to say that: 'It must be useful. It must function. And not for itself. If no one uses it, beginning with the theoretician himself (who then ceases to be a theoretician) then the theory is worthless or the moment is inappropriate' (Deleuze & Foucault, 1972, p. 208).

While the concept of history is not only acknowledged but also celebrated as a participant in the making of the new and assisting processes of emergence, the paper also argues for a rethinking of history, as constant variation, if it is to engage with the kinds of interiors that are emerging. Structures of categorisation and a privileging of the visual in relation to knowledge have produced histories of interior design, which are histories of objects and static form such as interior architecture, decoration and/or furniture. It is worth observing the shared dominant structures of both history and interior design: containers and enclosures, be they boxes of categories or boxes of architecture.

The position taken up here is not one of criticism and a posing of a better history, which re-writes to re-right. Instead it is an investigation in the possibility of writing a history of interiors that does not necessarily involve processes of enclosure. It is about reorienting and shifting dominant models to find a useful method to make a history that responds to emerging aspects of interior design that currently do not find a lineage in any of the existing histories and, in the process, produce a platform for new work and ideas. This platform, once made, will offer interior design students a diagram composed of multiple connections, spatialities and temporalities. It will then operate alongside existing histories organised around spatial concept of enclosure and fixed categories such as modernism and postmodernism, and temporal concepts of linearity such as past, present and future.

The research for this proposition draws on a number of philosophers' writings including Michel Foucault, Brian Massumi, Elizabeth Grosz and John Rajchman. The thread that links them together and invites them into this paper is Gilles Deleuze. The connection to their work is not one of referencing to add substance to a position nor as an example of precedence but a connection of usefulness – their writings have stimulated these ideas and offered directions that have been useful to the rethinking of an interior history. Their philosophies address and open up notions of both history and interiors.

The motivation for this research finds expression in the subtle yet startling shift of emphasis expressed by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* when he considers his reasons for writing history: 'Why? Simply because I am interested in the past? No, if one means by that writing a history of the past in terms of the present. Yes, if one means writing the history of the present' (Foucault, 1997, p. 31). Foucault makes apparent spatial distributions and temporal events as composing forces. Massumi's 'productionist approach' is another tool in this box – an approach that challenges the disciplines of the humanities, including history, in terms of the privileging of critical thinking to advocate instead an active relation of invention and affirmation to knowledge. Grosz and Rajchman – bring the temporal to the surface of their

focus. From their texts, I have picked up attitudes and styles, techniques and methods. All of these have been adapted and fashioned to become tools for the making of an interior history that seeks to pursue the directions offered up as well as take up the lines of potential expressed in students' projects.

### **Interior design and history**

The use of the term 'interior design' is deliberate and not interchangeable with interior architecture. A distinction is made here to indicate that the design of interiors is not to be limited to inside built form. This is vital to the ability to apprehend emerging forces. Fixed architectural enclosures are no longer the dominant shaping and mediating element for interior and exterior relations, for example – the change in the work environment. An office was once defined by a building – an office building. Now a building may have different functions at different times, sometimes an office, other times a home. An office then becomes a temporal and spatial occurrence involving a reorganising of relations – for example, from domestic to office environment. Another example is disciplinary confinement where it is no longer necessarily a physical enclosure such as a prison but may be a surveillance network that operates on a global positioning system. The question of interior and exterior are still pertinent and potent but they are dynamic, changing *relations* rather than one of permanence defined by built form. Interior design then becomes an activity of organising material spatially and temporally.

Similarly, the term 'history' is useful to tease out and question dominant and dominating structures. Mitchell Dean writes in his book, *Critical and Effective Histories. Foucault's method and historical sociology*: 'For no matter how much historical writing is about dimensions or aspects of the past, and refer to events, irruptions, discourses, and social practices that can be given a particular time-space, it is in fact an *activity* that is irrevocably linked in its current *uses*. One way of getting at this idea of history, as a *practice* within a definite present is to note that certain kinds of history arise from the rather simple necessity of having to deal with the records of one sort or another produced within and across the boundaries of national societies. ... This is not simply a repetition of the idea that all histories are written from a particular viewpoint or perspective, because it is also concerned to come to terms with history as a *practice*, as a *particular set on actions brought to bear on a particular material* (Dean, 1994, pp. 14–15).

I have italicised the words 'activity', 'uses' 'practice' and the phrase 'a particular set of actions ... on a particular material' to draw focus to design qualities implicit in this kind of attitude to history. Both design and history involve processes of ordering. Approached in

this way, history is understood as an activity involving a process of selection, collection and arrangement to construct an encounter with material and produce meaning. Museums are a wonderful example of three-dimensional histories in this sense – where visitors encounter history through processes of collection, organisation, arrangement and juxtaposition. They are spatial, temporal and material constructions that locate and energise objects and subjects to produce knowledge in relation.

This highlights a relation to history where the *making* of history is made apparent. In museums, for example, this involves a shift from displaying the object as the thing to be known and the subject as the knower to the event of encounter as the space where knowledge is produced (Whitehead, 1933, pp. 204–205). Massumi's concept of a 'productionist approach' where knowledge is produced and inventive, in contrast to knowledge as critique and interpretation, expresses a similar orientation (Massumi, 2002, p. 13).

While Massumi does not specifically address design or history in this context, his use of concepts of production and invention are qualities which connect to design thinking, especially in relation to the projective nature of design activity. As with Foucault, we are presented with the potential of history as a material practice involving actions and techniques in the production of what can be known. This approach is taken up in this paper as a vital ingredient in re-orienting history; to project, add and experiment in the making of an interior history. To pause then to consider existing histories of interior design which actualise a particular set of circumstances.

### **Existing histories of interior design**

Histories of art, architecture and interior design are strikingly similar in structure and methods of organisation. They are chronological accounts that privilege the visual and hence focus primarily on objects (which are able to be collected and categorised) and the process of containing (in systems of taxonomies and physically, in museums). It is the dominant model. The words of prominent Australian art historian Bernard Smith, for example, could also be applied to existing histories of interior design: '... classification in art history is primarily visual classification. That is why, in my view, art history is grounded epistemologically in the concept of style, and visual style at that. ... style addresses artefacts in their visuality, bringing order to that visuality. Nor is visual style an essential tool only to art history. It is essential also to archaeology for example' (Smith, 2000, pp. 6–7). It is interesting to note that Smith wrote this in a text titled *In Defence of Art History* which was a response to a series of papers on the challenges facing art history by practices, such as performance art, which do not privilege visual form.

Studying interior design in the early nineties, I found it curious that the history we were exposed to as students focused entirely on objects, mainly furniture and this contrasted to what we were engaged with in our design studios – spatial explorations. This history was also linear – beginning with Egyptian head stools and ending with postmodernism, which was addressed as a visual style of historical pastiche. It was apparent that this history was not able to incorporate the concept of spatiality. I was intrigued why interior design history did not respond to what was happening within its discipline and practice.

Histories of interior design are sparse on library and bookshops shelves. Those that exist follow the dominant model of history outlined above. John Pile's *A History of Interior Design* is a recent text and one of few texts dedicated to interior design yet it is a classical history text in that it demonstrates a linear chronological and stylistic model of history. Michael Bogle's *Designing Australia. Readings in the History of Design* is interesting as a collection of essays because the collection exposes what can be said and thought under such a title in the year 2002 in Australia. Under the heading of 'Interior Design' are four essays and each concerns decoration, domesticity and the home. *A Philosophy of Interior Design* by Stanley Abercrombie deals with the inside of architecture and breaks the interior into thresholds of inside/outside as defined by an architectural enclosure, for example doors, windows. *The Interior Dimension. A Theoretical Approach to Enclosed Space* by Joy Monice Malnar is another significant text, which attempts to position interior design – and as indicated in the title, interior is equated with enclosure.

In all of the above, interior design and history, and therefore the history of interior design – focus on objects and enclosure where the visual and static built form is privileged. My position is not one that dismisses these histories so much as highlight how they are shaped is due to the nature of their box of tools and this produces structures and systems. I am curious as to the potential of other ways of thinking and doing – of taking up a different attitude.

### **Interior design – current forces**

The condition of interior and interiority is generally conceived of as one of frames and enclosures – a container condition which is static, defined by boundary conditions and a pre-existing void to be filled. Different mobilities and technologies however are transforming boundaries and incite new possibilities. The relation between interior and exterior becomes dynamic and multiple, constantly changing and inverting. In final year RMIT interior design student thesis projects one can see the effect of these forces and shifts to concerns with mobility and the transient, to interstitial spaces in the production of interiors.

The temporal – how space is inhabited – is a vital force in these designs. ‘The emerging discipline of interior design is differentiated from interior decoration or architecture by its being a discipline of spatial performance and experience rather than one of composition or style’ (Pringle, 2001). In many ways, temporality is emerging as a defining element of current practice. From an interior design position, this offers much to consider and rather than interior as always already inside something – inside a container – it suggests an interior as produced through the spatialisation of matter by time: an event.

Elizabeth Grosz writes of the temporal in relation to architecture and while she does not specifically mention interior design, her question ‘How can we understand space differently, in order to organise, inhabit, and structure our living arrangements differently?’ addresses an interior condition. She goes on to suggest that answers lie in the ‘direction of time, duration, or temporal flow, which is usually conceptualised as the other, the outside, or the counterpart to space. [Her] central argument throughout is that architecture, geography, and urban planning have tended to neglect or ignore temporality or to reduce it to the measurable and the calculable, that is, to space. It is central to the future of architecture that the question of time, change and emergence become more integral to the process of design and construction (Grosz, 2001, p. xix).

Interior design histories have also ignored temporality in the design of interiors through a focus on objects and built space as static form. Or perhaps, it is due to an aspiration to equate interior design with architecture. Grosz’s writing, together with the other references made here, suggest – and advocate – a shift that is rich with possibilities and offers incentive to directions already being explored and experimented with through the discipline of interior design.

### **Inter-story – an attitude**

In an article on the question of what’s new in architecture with reference to Foucault and Jacques Derrida, John Rajchman makes a poignant observation that ‘the spaces we inhabit are always events that cannot be ever quite exhausted by the meanings with which we invest them’ (Rajchman, 1991, p. 153).

The concept of ‘inter-story’ is introduced here as a way to apprehend and incorporate the temporal as a composing force in the design of interiors. It plays on a combination of the words ‘interior’ and ‘history’ – becoming inter- and -story. To enter between them: outside the enclosures of both; in the encounter between them. It is posed as a place and attitude for making an interior history. The interior as a concept of enclosure is *intervened* and opened – becoming a dynamic spatial and temporal condition between things where interiors and exteriors are in constant production.

The *interrupting* of history as a strategy to destabilise models, assumptions and givens of both history and interior design is the main driving force. Inter-story gestures towards a different order from a linear or dialectical one, and enters between. Stories that are 'inter', both spatially and temporally, that interrupt dominant narratives, interfere with models, and intervene to dislocate plans, as 'a way of spacing that gives its place to the event' (Rajchman, 1991, p. 157). In contrast to history as a processing of enclosing and fixing, it becomes a question of building a platform for arrivals and departures where the emphasis is not on finding and fixing meaning but on *making* sense, on producing and inventing. A writing of interior design as a history of temporal inter-faces with space shifts the focus from a history of static objects and built form to, both, history and interiors as dynamic productions in the inhabitation of space.

'History is the archive, the drawing of what we are and what we are ceasing to be, whilst the current is the sketch of what we are becoming' (Deleuze, 1992, p. 164). A drawing of 'what we are and what we are ceasing to be' – it is these tangled lines and a process of drawing them out which provide conjunctions for creativity. Inter-story engages these spatial and temporal relations to consider differently other ways of drawing, producing maps and experimentations, diagrams of orientation and stylistic stances where movement, change, and temporality produce interiors and exteriors. What kinds of inter-stories will perform this interior history? The sketch has been done here – if ever so lightly – in a process of becoming.

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