

## inside-out: speculating on the interior

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**Abstract:** *In this paper, I have speculated on the interior as a site and an idea of betweenness. Feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray (Irigaray 1999) has associated the concept of interior with dualist and gendered philosophies. Nevertheless, the interior as a site has offered many opportunities for artists and occupants to challenge how we inhabit and change architecture. In this paper, I will focus on a design project that involves experimental making and living as part of a subversive approach to architecture: suggesting that we might re-conceptualise 'interior' as the space of betweenness rather than the space of the contained. This paper, part of my ongoing doctoral research, has extended ideas about the interior that I explored in the 2003 IDEA journal and has reflected my personal experience of collaborative, experimental design practices. The purpose of my research is to explore the betweenness of spatial practice.*

**Keywords:** *interior, architecture, betweenness*

### interior as a philosophical idea

Firstly, I will establish a conceptual framework for the idea of interior, which I will later use to critique my personal experience of design practice in interior sites. I have drawn from writings about space by two feminist philosophers, Luce Irigaray and Elizabeth Grosz. Both authors have associated interior space with being oppressed in dualist, gendered philosophy: both have sought alternative ways to think about space differently. For this reason, I believe their ideas are provocative for thinking about interior space and practice, focusing in particular on alternative approaches to the making of physical interior environments.

According to Irigaray's (1999) feminist critique of space, in the philosophical writings of Martin Heidegger (1975) the interior has been reduced to a space associated with containment. In Heidegger's writings, the concept of interior relies on a clear division between inside and outside, to the extent that the interior is a conceptual space that contains in an oppressive, negative way (Irigaray, 1999, pp. 95–96). Irigaray believes Heidegger reduced space to a singular construct by relating all of our interrelations with space and architecture to the overarching concept of *Being*. Heidegger has therefore constructed a 'world' that encloses and suppresses other kinds of thinking within his philosophy: 'by organizing the parts of space into a single totality...man obtains an 'interiority' (Irigaray, 1999, p. 95). Consequently, Heidegger's descriptions of architecture embody patriarchal and dualist thinking: the interior created by 'his' architectural envelope is an oppressive and exclusive space (Irigaray 1999, p. 95). In other words, the interior is inferior and limited by

the architectural form that contains it. The only way to overcome this conceptual interiority is, for Irigaray, to redefine space through its interrelationship with time, birth and movement (Grosz, 2001, p. 157). The space created by the womb is, for Irigaray, the original space of the 'maternal-feminine body' (Grosz 2000, p. 263 ): a space associated with the gift of life, the passage of birth and a sharing of life *between* male and female (Grosz, 2001, p. 159).

Grosz (2001) describes Irigaray's interest in the interval or between as a way of acknowledging the difference denied in patriarchal thinking: the between refers to '...the movement or passage from one existence to another' (Grosz, 2001, p. 157). The blurring of interior and exterior, for example, equally acknowledges both qualities while allowing for the sharing or merging reflected in the processes of birth. Grosz (2001) speculates on the implications of this thinking for architects and architecture, suggesting we might think beyond functional and fixed notions of space, to make:

*...architecture as envelope, which permits the passage from one space and position to another, rather than the containment of objects and functions in which each thing finds its rightful place. Building would not function as finished object but rather as spatial process, open to whatever use it may be put to in an indeterminate future, not as a container of solids but as a facilitator of flows: 'volume without contour', as Irigaray describes it in Speculum (Grosz, 2001, p. 165).*

### **interior as a physical site**

I believe Grosz's and Irigaray's thinking is provocative for the discipline of interior design, as it has highlighted how interior space is contained and constrained by the architectural envelope in philosophical writing. Grosz and Irigaray have also described how we can think of architecture as more than a space that contains – and, consequently, how interiors and interior objects can be more than that which is 'contained' by architecture. Grosz' has also speculated on how this shift in thinking might affect architectural practice, suggesting that buildings might be less restrictive in terms of how they can be occupied. I have explored how designing might be enmeshed with building and occupying space in my doctoral research, and have used Grosz's and Irigaray's thinking to critique and re-conceptualise practice as a blurring of these activities. In this paper, I have focused on the alteration of an existing residence, *Avebury St*, which I have worked on for many years. Using Grosz's and Irigaray's thinking about interior space and containment, I have been able to reconceptualise the manipulation of spaces and objects inside a building as *betweenness* and blurring. The *Avebury St* project has reflected a blurring of *both* interior and exterior physical space *and* the processes of designing, making and occupying space. As a consequence, the

architectural envelope has been physically and conceptually eroded through our experimental, collaborative designing of this project. Designing from the inside-out has provided my collaborators and I with an opportunity for practice denied in the restrictive, dualist practice of professional architecture. My family and I have extended the making of our personal home into a practice based in a broader social ritual and experimental construction, and as such, I believe the interior has become a space that interconnects rather than contains. Many artists have used the interior as a project site in which to question notions of containment and boundary: artists such as Gordon Matta-Clark (Diserens, 1993, p. 35; Ran-Moseley, 1995, p. 81), Andrea Zittel (Bartolucci, 2003, pp. 14–15) and Allan Wexler (Shulz, 1998, p. 46) have created experimental spaces and interior installations that reflect a questioning of how we inhabit space. Rather than being a site of containment, the interior has provided a site in which these artists might question the conceptual boundaries of building envelopes and spatial occupation. The *Avebury St* project has extended this approach into an everyday, family and collaborative, rather than artistic, context.

*Avebury St* has involved the alteration of an existing, termite-eaten, one-bedroom house at West End. Unlike conventional architectural projects, my partner and I have lived in the site as part of the design and building process. As we do not have the budget to extend the building shell, we have focused on the interior and the materials and surfaces of the architectural envelope. My partner and I have struggled to accommodate myself and my family within a dilapidated and inadequate building structure, re-working existing and salvaged materials. Aided by my partner's cabinetmaking and building skills, we have developed an approach to the building that resembles the experimental making of Do-It-Yourself projects and installation art rather than professional design practice. In conventional architectural and design practice, I developed a design concept for the client: I produced drawings of the proposal that represented the qualities of the design and which could be used for building approval and costing; I then arranged for a builder to construct the design on behalf of the client. In professional practice, each activity of designing, building and occupation is normally performed by separate entities and as distinct stages. The architect or interior designer is also regarded as the design 'author', such that the builder and building occupant become peripheral to the design process. This has resulted in Western architectural practice reflecting a segregated approach to society and building (Willis, 1999, pp. 206–209). At *Avebury St*, we have taken a more experimental approach, exploring space through simultaneous building and inhabitation, thus 'developing the concept from the making' (Guedes, 2004) rather than through drawing. We have valued the physical and conceptual contributions of friends, colleagues and visitors as an essential aspect of the experimental making and living,

and, most importantly, the design process. Projects such as *Avebury St* can help us ‘rethink’ the interior as a blurring of physical and conceptual boundaries of space: Irigaray’s ‘volume without contour’ (Grosz, 2001, p. 165).



Figure 1: Before and after external images of *Avebury St*, 2001.  
(Photography: Matthew Dixon, project collaborator)

### **a provisional life: the ephemeral nature of interiors**

In the following sections, I have highlighted four important issues of making the *Avebury St* interior that contribute to its conceptual *betweenness*. The first issue relates to the provisional nature of designing. We have treated our alterations at *Avebury St* as built propositions about how we might live in space. These propositions in turn generate subsequent questions which we investigate through altering our environments. This reflects the idea that building is a process of becoming, rather than producing a finite, finished object: acknowledging that life is provisional and experimental to some degree (Brand, 1994, p. 23; Willis, 1999, p. 114). We have treated spaces, their uses and the objects in them as ephemeral installations: for example, a walk-in wardrobe has been transformed into several different uses including study, bedroom, dining room, play space, and a library / office. Termite-eaten walls were removed, and then replaced with walls made of shelves. We reinvent the space, and it reinvents how we live through simultaneous designing, making and occupation.



*Figure 2: Evolving space at Avebury St, 2000–2004. Wardrobe/bedroom, dining room, workshop, library/study, and beyond...  
(Photography: Matthew Dixon, project collaborator)*



*Figure 3: Maintenance or building work? 2002  
(Photography: Matthew Dixon)*



*Figure 4: Views inside-out, 2004.  
(Photography: Author)*



*Figure 5: Screen installation, 2004.  
(Photography: Matthew Dixon)*



*Figure 6: Edge space, 2003.  
(Photography: Matthew Dixon)*

### **architectural envelope as interior objects**

Interior objects and decorations are often seen as unnecessary and inferior to the quality of space and function defined by architecture (Miles, 2000, p. 80). Objects exist in space: architecture makes space. By re-appropriating standard interior objects and materials as architectural elements, we have challenged the boundaries of what constitutes the architectural envelope and its internal and external limits. For example, objects that once sat inside space (IKEA bookshelves, timber bath mats) have become interior walls and external security screens. By using objects in different ways, Rendell (1998) believes that we can re-imagine how the world defines us, and therefore the construct of what is outside (world) and what is inside (us) (p. 245). Objects and spaces are no longer associated with the singular functions they were originally allocated – cupboards might be for storage, define rooms inside the building, and frame views of the landscape outside the building. I believe when interior objects can become and define the quality of spatial enclosure, the interior is no longer bounded by the structure of architecture.

### **material re-invention**

Similarly, working with found and recycled materials on site helps architects and designers to be connected with the social and material conditions of architecture (Willis, 1999, p. 115): materials become part of the 'story' and the continuity of a place. In professional practice in Western societies, architects and designers develop concepts away from the site and construction using drawings and abstract ideas about materials (Robbins, 1994; Willis, 1999). At *Avebury St*, designing and materials were blurred, because designs were tested at full-scale on site using the materials salvaged from local construction site bins and demolition shops. We used drawing as an active part of our making on site, rather than the abstract representation of ideas. Materials were also salvaged from the existing building. We demolished non-structural timber walls and lining to open up interior spaces: later transforming the material into timber battens forming internal and external screen walls.

### **undoing edges: surface as a blurring between interior and exterior**

Recognising that 'a border has thickness and edges' (Hill, 1998, p. 150), we have treated the architectural envelope as a space that contributes to both the internal and external building quality. We replaced solid external wall cladding with layers of translucent, transparent and 'broken' materials like polycarbonate sheeting and recycled timber boards. We also re-made existing window and door openings with new joinery, awnings and vertical screens. Both strategies have created new transitional zones that physically and visually blur interior and exterior space while working with the existing architectural volume. By removing existing, non-structural walls, we have also enabled all internal rooms and spaces to have views through each other, and through the new thresholds, to soft or green landscapes. The existing house was once defined by solid materials and small internal spaces, so that we were contained by the building fabric. By re-constructing the interior and its edge materials, the interior has become a space of conceptual and physical blurring with the external landscape.

### **redefining making as *betweenness***

For social theorist Tanya Titchkosky (1996), *betweenness* refers to a state of blurring, a transitional condition involving people coming to terms with their place in the world. We could also describe the process of designing at *Avebury St* as *betweenness*. In professional practice, professionals 'design' and builders 'make'. At *Avebury St*, we have extended the concept of making to embrace everyday social activities inside the house as well as conventional construction work. Making has therefore included: conceptual and physical contributions by friends, neighbours and visitors; repairing termite-eaten structure; building

of furniture installations, screens and stairs; and painting and decorating. According to local building regulations, this work may be interpreted as building maintenance rather than new building work. We may not often consider maintaining building materials, furniture and interiors as design or art practice (Morgan, 1998, p. 114), yet I believe this collaborative design-and-making reflects the potential for practice to be simultaneously driven by the social, ethical and experimental aspects of architecture. Our friends and colleagues have valued the opportunity to participate in the project (Brisbin & Tocker, 2003; McMahon, 2003): revealing the potential of an 'above-subsistence sociality' (Grosz 2001, p. 165) beyond the functional mandates of commercial architectural practice. *Avebury St* has recently become a more 'public' space through two changes in circumstances: the expansion of the household to accommodate our child, and mother/mother-in-law: and the participation in the *Not for Sale* public art project, selected to be part of the *Art and Arch Infinite* exhibition in September – October 2004. This art project involved other artists and extended from our negative experiences of real estate in West End: our proposal involved the installation of re-coded real estate signs in front of the properties of project participants around the suburb. Our group did not proceed with the installation due to the onerous public liability placed on the participants. Nevertheless, the proposal has helped our project become part of a broader social practice of people, materials, places and place-making politics.

### **summary: interior as *betweenness***

What are the implications of experimental projects like *Avebury St* for architecture and design? These projects demonstrate that by challenging the conceptual, qualitative and physical boundaries associated with architectural envelopes, we can redefine the concept of interior from *being contained* to *betweenness*. This redefinition highlights a number of issues for design practice. Firstly, our approach shows how space can be made to reflect the provisional, ephemeral and experimental nature of life. The participants and I have been able to design in collaborative, experimental ways denied in commercially-orientated professional practice, segregated from the processes of making and building occupation. Small, interior-scaled objects and cladding materials have provided opportunities for experimental building without the safety issues associated with alterations to building structure. Furthermore, interior elements, cladding materials and non-structural installations have enabled us to reconnect the interior to external landscape, such that interior is neither secondary to nor limited by the existing architectural form. We should think of the interior as more than an empty fitout space, a container to be filled by our 'interior design', as this implies that the interior is defined by and secondary to architecture. Instead, we might think of interior as a site of possibilities for making, occupying and most importantly, generating architecture from the inside-out.



In my professional practice experience, interior designing was seen as an activity that either happened within, or in opposition to, the framework established by architectural structure and master planning. However, this study has shown that interior space can be re-made and re-imagined beyond the conceptual categories of interior / exterior space, structure, decoration and fitout. Daniel Willis (1999) has stated that activities that are different to professional practice, such as experimental building, help to rekindle the imaginative, material and social dimensions of architecture so easily lost within the complexities of the commercial world (p. 203). *Avebury St* is an example of one such practice. As an educator, I believe design students need opportunities for designing through experimental making, to show how architecture can be made as more than a discrete form or container, and how the interconnections of people, materials and sites can generate space. These approaches require a significant investment of time and resources. An excessive degree of change in both life and space can be emotionally and physically demanding on the physical occupants, as highlighted by the project participants: at *Avebury St*, my family and I have struggled with limited finances, internal space, materials, time and labour. Nevertheless, if we had approached the project in a conventional architectural manner by extending and altering the existing building volume according to a preconceived plan, we would have limited our people-space interactions to the dictates of the architectural form - thus becoming 'contained' by the architecture. Projects like *Avebury St* provide opportunities for designers and architects that are unlike conventional practice, and thus *disclose* the social and conceptual *betweenness* of architecture: in these projects, the interior provides the medium through which we reveal the social, collaborative and ephemeral aspects of space that are repressed in conventional design practice.

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Figure 7: *Edges, materials, protrusions, 2004.*  
(Photography: Matthew Dixon)