# Between-ness: Theory and Practice within the Margins of Excess

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**Abstract:** *In this paper, a theoretical framework developed in a doctoral program of research concerned with connecting philosophies of between-ness with design practice is described. The theory of 'spatial excess' as defined by Elizabeth Grosz is shown to be particularly useful in reconceptualising design practice. Central to this is an understanding of spatial excess in relation to anti-deterministic space, the search for different spatial inhabitations, and ephemeral people-space relations; dimensions developed further in the doctoral program through two spatial practices that exist outside conventional architecture and design – site specific installation art and experimental making. These are outlined in the paper together with findings that suggest that practices of spatial excess might be most potent in sites that are conceptually and physically interior, and that these practices should happen in everyday contexts and environments where they can be initiated by their occupants.*

**Keywords:** *spatial excess; installation art; experimental making*

## Introduction

For many years I have been attracted to theories of the in-between, the marginal, and the liminal. As both an interior designer and architect, I also exist in the blurring of two disciplinary boundaries. In this paper, I describe how I use the theory of excess to explore this situation in a way that offers alternatives for design practice and that responds to the question: what might an excessive design process be?

In her book, *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space*, Elizabeth Grosz developed her theory of spatial excess informed by the work of Georges Bataille and Luce Irigaray. Bataille and Irigaray are interested in the excremental and marginal in architecture (Irigaray, 1999; Grosz, 2001, p. 153). These theorists of excess seek alternative ideas about our relationships with space; particularly those that are repressed in dominant architectural representations – for example, patriarchal philosophies of space that deny or downplay the existence of the feminine (Irigaray, 1999, pp. 96–97; Grosz, 2001, p. 151). In these theories, architecture is synonymous with dominance, order, monumental objects and forms that create boundary conditions such as the binary of inside and outside. To respond to the binary dilemma, we can extend the theoretical ground of excess to include the notion of conceptual *between-ness*; that which is neither one state nor the other but a zone of blurring in-between. An example of between-ness might be the rite of passage between child and

adult (Bullock, Stallybrass &Trombley, 1988, pp. 748–749), or a transformative experience provoked by an artwork (Bhabha, 1996b, p. 10). The concept of between-ness in literature appears under the guise of the terms marginal, liminal and others, all of which refer to a transformative, transitional state of being (Bennett, 1993; Greenblatt, 1995; Bhabha, 1996a; Bhabha, 1996b; Titchkosky, 1996; Heidegger, 1997; Hill, 1998b; Tschumi, 1999; Inwood, 2000; Schaetti et al, 2000). Between-ness also refers to people's interrelationship with space or their 'coming to understand human relations to place' (Titchkosky, 1996, p. 222). This is particularly relevant for reconceptualising the ways in which people might inhabit and interact with space. Tanya Titchkosky (1996) also believed art practice expresses the state of locating the self in the world, a process of moving 'between the "outside" and the "mainstream" ' (p. v). The spatial and social dimensions of between-ness therefore parallel the concerns of spatial excess, and in this paper, I use the terms interchangeably.

Spatial excess and between-ness deal with philosophical and political issues, not simple questions about exterior and interior built form. Consequently, instead of considering the characteristics of actual physical spaces, it is more relevant to consider the approaches to space embedded in the design process. Architectural excess defies the systematic order of space (Grosz, 2001, p. 153). Western architects and designers conceptualise the built environment through drawings: the ideas must be realised by builders without significant deviation from the plans. Many theorists believe this ordered sense of architecture fails to account for the reality of how people live in space. They criticise how the built work is generally viewed as a finished object that does not accommodate how people actually inhabit space over time (Brand, 1994, p. 3; Hill, 1998b, p. 143; Brand, 2000; Grosz, 2001, p. 137). An excessive design process would therefore defy pre-determined ideas about space.

## Revisiting the theoretical ground: Spatial excess and inhabitation

Grosz's theory of spatial excess – that is, how she relates the concept of excess to the concept of space – has three main dimensions relevant to my research and its discussion in this paper. Excess in architecture is understood as that which exceeds the notion of functionality, or the idea that the way spaces are occupied can be pre-determined (Grosz, 2001, p. 151). Theories of functionalism in architecture arose in the early twentieth century and reflect the view that inhabitants respond passively, rather than unpredictably, to architect-determined built form (Hill, 1998b, p. 143). Although philosophies of determinism are outdated, many contemporary spatial theorists like Elizabeth Grosz (2001), Jonathan Hill (1998b; 1998a), C. Thomas Mitchell (1993) and Daniel Willis (1999) have challenged the pervading legacy of this paradigm in architectural theory and practice. They would suggest that we need to think

about how spaces might exceed current modes of inhabitation, and in particular, become more relevant to different kinds of people and communities. This is the second dimension of spatial excess: the capacity of spaces to be inhabited or occupied differently. Finally, theories of spatial excess have a temporal dimension in that they project different possibilities of being in space in the future. However, how can we use theories of spatial excess in design practice, and how do designers and architects incorporate this approach into their design process?

## Between-ness as practice: Site-specific installation art

Elizabeth Grosz (2001) has stated that we need to open up the discourse of architecture. To do this, we must create a 'thirdspace' (Grosz, 2001, p. xv) or space of blurring between the architectural discipline and alternative spatial ideas. In response, I have considered two spatial practices that I believe reflect the characteristics of spatial excess/between-ness and which exist beyond conventional understandings of architecture and interior design. The first practice is site-specific installation. I use the term site-specific installation to differentiate between art that responds to and is constructed in a specific location, and art that is merely placed or installed in a space (Reiss, 1999, p. xix & 149; Kwon, 2002, p. 1). Installation art is a broad term for an artistic genre in which the entire space is an integral part of an artwork. In an effort to make their work more accessible to the public, artists originally located their installation art in alternative spaces to mainstream galleries and museums (Reiss, 1999, p. 15). Artists believe that meaning does not reside in the artwork; rather, the artistic experience arises in the interaction between people and the art space (Papararo, 1998; Reiss, 1999). Installation art is therefore associated with site-specificity and audience participation (de Oliveira, 1998; Papararo, 1998; Reiss, 1999). Participation ranges from placing objects in the audience's path through a space, to encouraging people to change a work physically, as in Kaprow's *Words* artwork of 1962 (Reiss, 1999, p. 5). In this work, participants could rearrange words on paper rolls that hung in the space. Site-specific installation also arose as a critique of the art spaces and contexts in which it was sited by encouraging audience interaction in a context where this was normally discouraged (Papararo, 1998; Reiss, 1999, p. 145).

Theories of site-specific installation parallel the conceptual concerns of between-ness. For example, Steven Greenblatt (Greenblatt, 1995), Homi Bhabha (Bhabha, 1996b) and Jonathan Hill (Hill, 1998b) have each described the experience of particular art space as liminal, in that it invokes a transformative or transitional experience in the audience. Julie Reiss (1999) defined installation art in terms of its marginality to mainstream art. In the above critiques, installation art is understood to *exceed* and problematise the established order of its spatial

context, particularly the norms of using and experiencing a gallery. Installation's artistic polemic thus exists *between* the art and its spatial context, *between* people and the art space, and *between* the alternative and mainstream art spaces it challenges.

Theories about site-specific installation art as a practice support the three main dimensions of spatial excess introduced earlier in this paper. These are: anti-deterministic space; the search for different spatial inhabitations; and ephemeral people-space relations. In terms of the first dimension, theories of installation reflect the view that people control or determine their own artistic experiences. Consequently, the art work should allow the audience to define the form of the work in some way (Reiss, 1999, p. 149). On a philosophical level, people and space are seen as interdependent entities rather than passive recipients of a space. Art forms such as painting and sculpture were traditionally conceived as independent objects the artistic intent of which is embedded in the work (Bearn, 1997). In contrast, installation artists conceptualise an artwork as incomplete without audience interaction or interpretation (Reiss, 1999, p. 14). Each site-specific installation is seen as a framework or proposition about how audiences might interact with space. It is also accepted that the form of this interaction and interpretation is largely unpredictable or indeterminable. Therefore, to some degree, the art work is open-ended, reinforcing the view that people's interactions with space cannot be completely controlled by physical environments (Mitchell, 1993, p. 87; Hill, 1998b, pp. 146–147).

The second dimension of spatial excess is a concern for inhabiting space differently. Similarly, site-specific installation artists express a concern for people-space interaction, or the different ways in which people interact with the art space. Each installation becomes an experiment in people-space interaction within the framework of a particular artwork. Finally, as an ephemeral entity (the third dimension), the artwork is explicitly a proposition about how space might be inhabited, and the differences in the actual inhabitation comprise the art experience.

Several architectural theorists are drawn to installation art as an exemplar for a more dynamic architectural practice (Mitchell, 1993, p. 116; Smith, 1996, pp. 34–35; Hill, 1998b, p. 147; Willis, 1999, p. 103; Smith, 2002). These theorists believe in an interdependent conception of space: architecture is seen as the interrelationship between people with, and in, space rather than in and with physical form alone. All these theorists are critical of the primacy of building aesthetic and form in the design process, particularly where it is of detriment to those inhabiting the building. By prioritising the ephemeral people-space relations characteristic of site-specific installation art, these theorists hope architects can adopt a less deterministic

design process. This concern reflects a sense of between-ness, whereby participation in the making of space transforms people's relationship to space. Between-ness also informs these theorists' views of the 'interdisciplinary'. Architecture is not defined by its media, such as the making of exterior form; rather, it is defined as 'a particular relation between a subject and an object, in which the former occupies the later' (Hill, 1998b, p. 147). Consequently, these theorists extend their understanding of architecture through the conceptual between-ness found in the space of blurring between design, architecture and contemporary art. Through conceptualisations of space found beyond the discipline, we can challenge all design theory and practice.

To develop my theoretical understanding of installation as a practice of between-ness or spatial excess, I experimented with and produced a series of installations. My speculations on installation have emerged through my own experience of practice overlaid and connected with existing theory. My concern here is not to focus on specific details or outcomes, but rather to use the installations as illustrations of theory. These installations occurred at: the West End Street Festival in Boundary St. (Smith, 2000a); Architect's Art Exhibition at the Brisbane Royal Institute of Architects (Smith, 1999; Smith & Rasmussen, 2001); and at the QUT Art Museum (Smith, 2000b). In the lineage of artist Allan Kaprow (Reiss, 1999, p. 10), I felt the best way to encourage user participation and site-specificity in installations was to make works that people could physically touch and move (Figure 1). I define architecture as people-space interaction and, as such, felt compelled to involve other people in the design process. I did this in two ways: by involving people in the development of the work; and by encouraging the audience to change the works when they were installed in a site. For example, the festival installation was developed with other artists who used elements of it as props for their performances (Figure 2).

This research connects theories of between-ness and spatial excess to *theories* of practice and design process. Although it is constrained by the limitations of descriptions of practice by critics and artists, it reflects the realities of installation art practice. Literature about site-specific art reinforces the idea that images and text about an artwork cannot be substitutes for our direct experience of an artwork. Nevertheless, many people cannot directly experience most installations because the works are specific to a location and a particular time. This means that most people access the work through catalogues and critiques (Reiss, 1999, p. xiv). To explore the correlation between site-specific installation and spatial excess is therefore to explore conceptions or theories of practice in relation to philosophical ideas. My original research adds to theories of practice through my own insights as researcher and through the insights of project participants/collaborators.
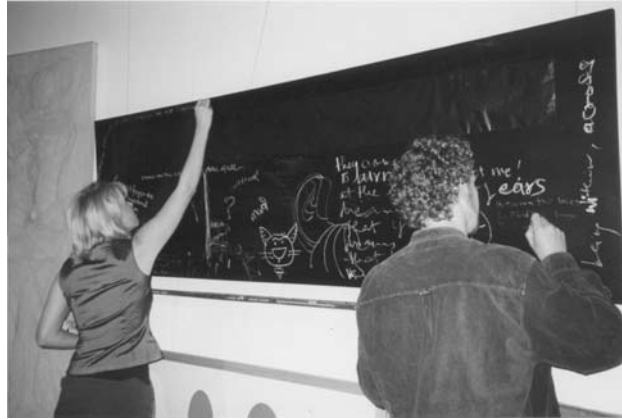
*Figure 1: People drawing on blackboard in Respond installation at Architect's Art Exhibition, Brisbane, 1999. (Photography: Author)*



*Figure 2: Street performers use box elements from Behind the Boundary installation, West End Street Festival, Brisbane, 2000. (Photography: Author)*

## Speculations on installation as between-ness

My research into installation has highlighted two main issues in relation to philosophies of between-ness and spatial excess. My first concern for installation as a practice of spatial excess is related to its tendency to become a spectacle isolated from everyday environmental contexts. While some artworks are placed *in* everyday public spheres, the artwork has impact because it differs from the context in which it is sited. That is, the installation draws our attention to those spaces and issues that ordinarily form the background to our everyday

lives and which we take for granted (Smith, 1996, p. 74). We can explain installation in terms of the ideas of spectacle and presence found in architect Glen Hill's (2002) critique of architectural, phenomenological theories of place. As a resident, we encounter place through everyday rituals that become the background to our lives. This enables us to form rich and deep attachments to a place. In contrast, a tourist experiences a place through superficial contact with the everyday, so that things residents may take for granted become novel and 'present'. This is an experience of spectacle, where everything exists in the foreground. Art works can also be described in terms of spectacle and presence. Hill (2002) has noted that art's intent is to bring 'the unnoticed everyday world (our place) into presence' (Hill, 2002, p. 9).

The people-space interaction of all my installations reflects this conceptual play between foreground/presence and background/absence. The audience voluntarily and readily appropriated elements of the artworks which resembled the scale and use of everyday, taken-for-granted, 'absent' interior objects and rituals: boxes became children's toys and adults' seats in the festival (Figure 3); the blackboard became a place for comments and graffiti in the exhibition/museum context (Figure 1); and edible cakes and stickers were highly popular aspects of the *Dress/Incubator* installation (Figure 4). These interactive elements appear in the background of everyday domestic interiors, yet in the art space context, exist in contrast to adjacent exhibitions. For the audience's experience to be integral with the artwork, it must be contrasted or brought to the foreground of the museum/gallery/art space. It is an installation's capacity to be present and to exceed the boundaries of conventional art spaces that makes it effective as an art form. The question is, therefore, what types of practices of spatial excess can occur in more everyday environments without necessarily compromising a sense of presence/spectacle?

My second concern with installation is how it embraces alternative or marginal communities, a key issue for theorists of spatial excess (Grosz, 2001, p. 152). Marginality, the state of existing between social or cultural states, may also be described as between-ness (Titchkosky, 1996, p. 38). One example of making spaces that address social marginality is the creation of queer spaces such as in Sydney's Oxford Street (Grosz, 2001, p. 9). The content of individual installations may also address themes of transition and marginality, and might be located in more everyday spaces than mainstream galleries, like shop fronts or festivals. Nevertheless, the genre as a whole does not propose how spaces might be inhabited differently by fringe communities beyond the reach of the art audience/context. I therefore believe practices of spatial excess must be both situated in, and initiated by those who inhabit everyday spaces.

*Figure 3: Children interacting with the Behind the Boundary installation
at the West End Street Festival, Brisbane, 2000.
(Photography: Author)*



*Figure 4: Details of the Incubator / Dress installation at the Architect's Art Exhibition,
Brisbane, 2001 (collaboration between Cathy Smith and Tamara Rasmussen)
(Photography: Author)*

## Between-ness as practice: Experimental making

One of the key issues, which arose during my installation research, was the practice of making. Architectural theorist Daniel Willis (1999) proposed that Christo's installation artworks are successful because '[M]aking and meaning are inextricably bound together' (p. 112); Christo's wrapping projects involve the community in the ritual of assembling the work. I believe a second design practice, which I term *experimental making*, provides a stronger example of spatial excess as it incorporates both a sense of presence/spectacle and the everyday. *Experimental making*, has not been directly associated with theories of between-ness, nor the practice of installation art. I use the term experimental making to explain design testing through full-scale construction without conventional, pre-determined plans. This experimental making is uncharacteristic of mainstream design and building and is more commonly referred to as DIY (Do-It-Yourself) building and squatting. These practices occur in everyday contexts and environments, and are initiated by the occupants of a space rather than an artist 'outsider'.

Experimental making is an example of spatial excess as it: proceeds without pre-determined plans; is characterised by continuous change; and is sited in everyday contexts, which are nevertheless marginal to mainstream design. Experimental making responds to the needs of the occupants as they arise, happening without drawings that pre-determine the design outcome. Paradoxically, this process reflects the origins of architecture where the architect was the builder and the design evolved on site during construction (Robbins, 1994, p. 15; Willis, 1999, p. 115). Experimental making initiated by home dwellers and squatters also exceeds what might be considered architecture by professional architects: it is by definition executed by those who inhabit a space, who may or may not be architecturally trained (Rendell, 1998, p. 232). Experimental making has an explicit political concern with making architecture more accessible to occupants than architect-designed environments, whilst retaining the characteristics of change or spectacle, which make installation a practice of spatial excess.

## Experimental making at Avebury Street

I would now like to discuss experimental making using a project that I have been involved with throughout the duration of my research. This project involves the re-making of a small, dilapidated house in inner city Brisbane (Figure 5). While I initiated the Avebury St. project with my fellow resident partner, this is a collaborative project involving conceptual and physical contributions by designers and non-designers. Unlike conventional architectural design, this project proceeds by making full-scale experiments rather than scaled drawings.

The physical interventions might be retained or discarded dependent on our changing needs as inhabitants. We also alter the space in response to suggestions by friends and/or visitors who inevitably become both friends and designers through the making process. This collegiate process differs from more conventional community collaborative projects where the architect is still the primary designer in the design process and where construction is separate from design. Although my partner and I 'occupy' the space on a more permanent basis, we consider all participants as occupants with insightful ideas about our interrelationships with them in, and with the space. As described by muf, 'in order to make the thing the collaboration has to be about the making of the relationship rather than the object' (muf, 2001, p. 29).

We also describe Avebury St. as maintenance rather than new building work. This is because the project does not involve alterations or extensions to the building shell, and is limited structurally to the re-making of termite-eaten or rotten structure. With our work limited to fitout and cladding materials, we can adopt a more experimental and participatory design process, and work beyond the constraints of town planners and building approval.

## Speculations on experimental making

As part of my research into the experimental making design process, I spoke to the project participants/collaborators about their perceptions and experiences of Avebury St. The participants reinforced the sense of spectacle of the project, expecting the space to change for each visit. The design process also created a positive collaborative environment. As we have no fixed plans, people have been comfortable with making suggestions about what my partner and I might do to the space to inhabit it differently. One example of this was William's collaboration on the design and making of the loft stair. William works with my partner Matthew as a furniture maker, resolving how to construct other peoples' designs. At Avebury St., William contributed many suggestions about the design of the stair – especially materials and details – and participated in the physical making (Figure 6). William enjoyed 'working on the design parameters' (McMahon, 2003) whilst simultaneously resolving construction issues. The design evolved both *through* the construction process, and *through* our changing occupation of the internal spaces. While the spatial ephemerality of the project is both characteristic of the spectacle of site-specific installation art and the idea of *spatial* excess, the project participants also experienced the space as friends and participated in everyday rituals other than building; rituals such as eating dinner after design/making sessions, drinking coffee, and for myself and my partner, everyday residency. Consequently, the participants' understanding of the project as spectacle was tempered by their everyday occupation of the home.

In the 1960s, some architects and designers became critical of the limitations of planned environments, adopting a 'Non-Plan' (Barker, 2000, p. 2) approach to design. Simultaneously, squatting became a radical, more accessible way of living (Franks, 2000, p. 41). Manuals described how squatters could adapt space to suit their needs, making squatting a participatory and everyday spatial practice. Squatting is the most political form of experimental making as it involves the illegitimate occupation, and often alteration, of a space. Most of these alterations occur *inside* buildings. Squatting provides a conceptual parallel to the Avebury St. project; a project which is undertaken from the inside-out. Avebury St. also exists in the blurred zone between legitimate building and interior maintenance. This process of making without plans and preconceptions is incongruent with legislation that uses plans as a basis of building work approval. Construction work requiring approval must also be executed by a registered builder. The extent to which architectural design process can occur in an evolving and responsive way is in many ways thwarted by legislation and professional dogma. This paper is not an argument for the removal of legislation that controls standards of building; rather it is recognition of the sites for alternative theory and practice. For example, the interior and in particular, its furniture and occupation, do not require building approval when defined as 'maintenance work' on an existing building. Consequently, the interior provides the most potent site for the theorising and practice of between-ness.



*Figure 5: Edge space at Avebury St., 2002. (Photography: Matthew Dixon, project collaborator)*



*Figure 6: William and the stair at Avebury St., 2002. (Photography: Author)*

## Summary: The interior as a site of spatial excess

While the practices of installation art and experimental building exist beyond the boundaries of the professional disciplines of design and architecture, they do, as I have illustrated in this paper, suggest possibilities for realising theories of spatial excess in design practice. As designers, we need to look beyond the primacy of physical form and challenge a static design process disconnected from the process of making. Most importantly, we must recognise that occupants need to be involved in the process of making and appropriating space, for space to become meaningful to them (Willis, 1999, p. 112). Legislative parameters may restrict the sites of experimental making to the interior and its furnishings; nevertheless, this makes the interior a potent political ground which exceeds conventional architectural frameworks.

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