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idea journal

(extra) ordinary interiors:
practising critical reflection

vol. 18, no. 01

2021

the journal of IDEA: the interior design +
interior architecture educators association



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interior architecture educators association**

about

IDEA (Interior Design/Interior Architecture Educators Association) was formed in 1996 for the advancement and advocacy of education by encouraging and supporting excellence in interior design/interior architecture education and research within Australasia.

www.idea-edu.com

The objectives of IDEA are:

1. Objects

3.1 The general object of IDEA is the advancement of education by:

- (a) encouraging and supporting excellence in interior design/interior architecture/spatial design education and research globally and with specific focus on Oceania; and
- (b) being an authority on, and advocate for, interior design/interior architecture/spatial design education and research.

3.2 The specific objects of IDEA are:

- (a) to be an advocate for undergraduate and postgraduate programs at a minimum of AQF7 or equivalent education in interior design/interior architecture/spatial design;
- (b) to support the rich diversity of individual programs within the higher education sector;
- (c) to create collaboration between programs in the higher education sector;
- (d) to foster an attitude of lifelong learning;
- (e) to encourage staff and student exchange between programs;
- (f) to provide recognition for excellence in the advancement of interior design/interior architecture/spatial design education; and
- (g) to foster, publish and disseminate peer reviewed interior design/interior architecture/spatial design research.

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cover image

Lying motionless, listless. Consuming time; being present, each moment folds into another. Surfaces becoming expanses of inflections of hue. Normality expands into a stream of observing luminosity. Still image from video by Chora Carleton, 2021.

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this issue's provocation

(Extra) Ordinary Interiors calls for contributions from academics, research students and practitioners that demonstrate contemporary modes of criticality and reflection on specific interior environments in ways that expand upon that which is ordinary (of the everyday, common, banal, or taken for granted).

This theme has two agendas: First, the desire to amplify critical reflection as a key practice of the disciplines associated with this journal's readership. In short, to prompt interior designers, interior architects, and spatial designers to be more proactive and experimental in asserting their specialist knowledge and expertise as critical commentary. This asks authors to reconsider the role of critique and criticism in their scholarly and creative works, or, to demonstrate how to reflect critically upon a design and to locate the design's relation to material, political, social, cultural, historical and geographical concerns. Such an enterprise may reveal whether models of criticality centred on judgement, authority and historicism are relevant, constructive, insightful or generative, or, as Bruno Latour poses, have they 'run out of steam'?⁰¹ This exercise may prompt some to revisit key thinkers who pose new discursive, visual and temporal models for critical practice in this recent age of criticality. We draw your attention to *Critical Spatial Practice* by Nikolaus Hirsch and Markus Miessen, which asks for thinking "about 'space' without necessarily intervening in it physically, but trying to sensitise, promote, develop and foster an attitude towards contemporary spatial production, its triggers, driving forces, effects and affects... [to] speculate on the modalities of production and potential benefits of the role of 'the outsider.'"⁰²

We also look to Jane Rendell's introduction to *Critical Architecture*, which asserts that criticism and design are linked together by virtue of their shared interests in invoking social change.⁰³ Whether it takes written, built or speculative form, criticism is an action, which according to Roland Barthes, is a calling into crisis, a moment where existing definitions, disciplinary boundaries and assumptions about normativity are put into question.⁰⁴

The second agenda of this journal issue takes heed of the ordinary, and how, in its intense observation, what is normal or often taken for granted exceeds itself, becomes extra or more ordinary. Everyday spaces such as supermarkets, service stations, laundry mats, hardware stores, parks and four-way street intersections, and banal gestures such as washing the dishes, walking the dog or street sweeping become subject to critical scrutiny and introspection. Xavier de Maistre's *Voyage Around My Room*, Julio Cortázar's *Around the Day in Eighty Worlds*, and Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* are but a few historic examples that draw out critical depth and aesthetic meaning about ordinary interiors, interiors understood in the most liberal sense.⁰⁵ What new actions to the crisis of critical commentary lurk restlessly in ordinary interiors?

While a nostalgic or romantic response to this journal's theme may dwell on interior situations with no special or distinctive features, or explore the persistence and abundance of ordinary interiors, even commonplace spaces, noticed or not, it can not be denied that recent pandemic events world-wide have flung the many facets of everyday life into crisis, including long-standing notions of proximity, intimacy, hapticity, privacy, freedom and rights to access 'essential' services. For many, the world has become home and home has become an internal world, an interior contaminated or augmented by virtual technologies serving as lifelines to a previous highly social and diversified lifestyle. As the interior of one's domestic space finds coincidence with one's isolation bubble, many are finding that interiority and interiors are conflating to take on new meaning, new function, and new configuration. Ordinary scenes of dead flies on windowsills, sun rays pointing to poor house-keeping habits, mounting bags of uncollected rubbish and recycling, shuffling of mattresses, improvised work surfaces, revised chores rubrics, commandeering of the bathroom, and the commodity of headphones and adapters highlight an intensified condition.

Authors are prompted to practice a form of critical reflection on one (extra) ordinary interior.

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01 Bruno Latour. 'Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,' In *Critical Inquiry - Special issue on the Future of Critique* 30, no. 2 (2004): 25-248.

02 Nikolaus Hirsch and Markus Miessen, 'Architecture and Critical Spatial Practice,' 1 May 2020, criticalspatialpractice.org.

03 Jane Rendell, Jonathan Hill, Murray Fraser and Mark Dorrian (Eds), *Critical Architecture* (Oxon UK, USA and Canada: Routledge, 2007), 4.

04 Roland Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, translated and edited by Katrine Pilcher Keuneman (London and New York: The Althone Press, 1966).

05 Xavier de Maistre, *Voyage Around My Room*, translated by Stephen Sartarelli (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1994); Julio Cortázar, *Around the Day in Eighty Worlds*, translated by Thomas Christensen (San Francisco: North Point Press 1986); Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* [1931] (California: Harvest Books, 1978).

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introduction: extra's ordinary interiors

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idea journal

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idea journal

The histories of interior design, interior architecture and spatial design practice are richly punctuated by beautiful, monumental, radical experiments and spectacular examples. These form what many might call a canon of good practice; exemplars if you will. Interiors also have a unique relationship with the ordinary — they are affective without being noticed. These interiors are typically taken for granted, enmeshed in the everyday, forming under the influence of unseen spatial and material dynamics, unheroic, unpretentious, and often not found in design discourse. This *idea journal* issue, *(Extra) Ordinary Interiors: Practising Critical Reflection*, explores this ordinariness to reveal that these spaces bear out something more, something special, something extraordinary in their own modest, subtle, familiar, habitual, and understated qualities of inhabitation. For, in these quiet merits, the extra-ordinary capacity for our complex interrelationships with interior spaces resides.

When conceiving the agendas for this issue, we discussed memories of first reading Robin Evans's essay on the emergence of the corridor in 17th century English manor homes.⁰¹ So familiar was this compositional element to interior space that we wondered why anyone would write about something so ordinary? Of course, we'd overlooked the consideration that the corridor emerged from social reasoning and beliefs, and was designed to influence behaviour. The criticality of Evans's examination revealed a problem-space for the study of interiors, full of endless questions on the extraordinarily capacity of the unfixed and informal interrelations between interior material

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practices and our perceptions. It is in this spirit of finding the extra-ordinary through critical reflection on the ordinary that the twelve research articles and visual essays of this issue are presented. Each contributes complex ideas and subtle reflections on moments of interstitiality between our inhabiting bodies, interior materialities, virtual/social/urban spheres, dead artists and artworks, and memories of friends long-gone.

The first agenda for this journal issue was to amplify methods of critical reflection on interior spaces in order to address the extra-ordinary. Our aim was to prompt proactive and experimental approaches to exploring the specialist knowledge and expertise of interior spaces as critical commentary. This takes many forms, including radical approaches to defining interior spaces, such as Andrew Benjamin's examination of the interiors of the contemporary French architects Lacaton and Vassal and the ideas of interior spaces as sites for relational indeterminacy. Other approaches include radical forms of historiographic exploration, such as Tordis Berstrand's employment of performative writing strategies to actualise a history of three photographs of German artist Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau* (ca. 1933) interior installation. Another form is visual essays, which use radical approaches to text and image composition, such as Maria Gil Ulldemolins's interlaced examination of the layered, erotic woodblock print of Kitagawa Utamaro's 1788 *Lovers in an Upstairs Room* and her own domestic interior. All contributions evidence our assertion that criticism is an action — what Roland Barthes refers to as a calling into crisis — a moment where existing definitions, disciplinary boundaries and assumptions about normativity are put into question. ⁰²

The second agenda of this journal issue takes heed of the ordinary and how, in intense observation of it, what is normal or often taken for granted exceeds itself, becomes extra or more ordinary. On this agenda, Xavier de Maistre's 1790 novella *Voyage Around My Room* was discussed at length.⁰³ De Maistre's forty-two-day incarceration in his own apartment — for duelling illegally — speaks to a capacity for transcendent flights of imagination and insights that may arise from introspective curiosity about the objects and scenes of our everyday lives.⁰⁴ De Maistre's imaginative voyages while under house arrest reflect our ability to call the ordinary into crisis through the creative examination of critical depths and aesthetic meanings of ordinary interiors. Reading the contributions, it is clear how well-equipped artistic practices are with vocabularies to interrogate the everyday in such creative ways. From references to the works of George Perec, Marcel Duchamp, Gerhard Richter, and contributors' own artistic projects, the capacity of art to examine everyday ideas, objects and images through the creative displacement of ordinary things provides a common methodology across this issue. In this spirit, the invited contribution by the New Zealand-born visual artist Fiona Connor on her 2018 exhibition, *Closed Down Clubs*, is a valuable addition of a spatial art practice that interrogates the ordinary. Its collection of full-scale door sculptures from abandoned clubs within the United States of America speak as ordinary memorials of the interstitial moments of entry to these unique hyper-social interiors and their changing natures, discarded by external technological, economic, and political forces.

Condensation drapes the window glass and obscures the view of a hoar frost blanket.

A spider hangs in the corner, proud of its night's construction.

Three house flies cling to the ceiling in flight formation.

As the day emerges, thermal vents stir the insects' innards and nudge them to play chase in a tight circle, around and around and around, hours on end.

The heat from my laptop, which has been zooming since dawn, attracts the attention of a large blowfly drunk from cold; still dumb, loud, and annoying.

A blood-thirsty mosquito floats through the open window and hovers as a high-pitched irritant in the cloud of my breath before it lands to take a sip.

As the day wears on, these escapades escalate amongst swatting, flapping, brushing, and shooing.

My puppy manages to corner the blowfly between her paws, looking to me with eyes that ask: 'what to do now?'

The expiring sunlight creeps across the sill and the carcasses of what was the buzz in my ears all day. Every day.

The spider hangs in the corner licking its chops. **05**

Why now? Why are these critical reflections on extra-ordinary interiors timely? It would be remiss not to address the current displacement responsible for shifting our everyday experiences into crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic is the backdrop from which many extra-ordinary findings of this issue surface. Like de Maistre's house-arrest, globally imposed lockdowns have in many ways enabled recent critical explorations and reflections on the qualities and opportunities of our everyday interior spaces. Emphasis on interiority, communication methods, relationality, acting locally, on making, and interior permeability, are themes presented in this issue in response to the global collapse of

our civic spaces. Reflecting on how many of us have been or are currently sitting in our interiors in lock-down, one cannot help but imagine this issue as a kind of message in a bottle. A time capsule full of stories of intimate and extra-ordinary lives rolled up in interiors and thrown overboard into history, waiting for a future to find them and turn them into facts about this generational phenomenon.

Beyond the pandemic, each article offers critical reflections on the (extra) ordinary in its own way, as you will see. Yet, we recognise three interrelated qualities that emerged as extra-ordinary to us as we worked with these contributions to see them published. The first is the un-resolvable edge condition of interiors. Several contributions directly address the permeable, porous, and interactive edges of interior spaces by considering various economies of social, material, and emotive exchange between the inside and the other. What is extra-ordinary was the preparedness of authors to recognise interiors as unbounded and undefined — more as actions than as forms — constructed from constellations of relations and interactivities. This interdependent, temporal and softly edged understanding of interiors speaks to the extra-ordinary capacity of this field of study, wilfully remaining as unresolvable as our interactions, perceptions, and opinions.

The second (extra) ordinary quality we recognise is the preparedness of many authors to experiment with language. Several contributions confidently explore the creative capacity of words with highly distinctive effects. Radical historiographies, ficto-critical narratives, interlaced text and first-hand accounts are explored in various ways to extend new knowledge on interrelationships between subjectivities and interior spaces. It is exciting to read new voices taking risks with words and challenging accepted forms of knowledge production about interiors and interiority. And thirdly, the emphasis on practices of making-as-inquiry emerged across many articles in written and visual essay formats. Makeshift practices and assemblages of images, objects, and texts, interrogate and reflect on our everyday assumptions about habitual, local, and institutionalised contexts. Beyond documenting making practices, the creative

enactment of visual essays on the pages of this issue provokes *our* extra-ordinary capacities as readers and viewers to construct our own new knowledge of interior spaces through prompted interpretation.

We want to extend our great appreciation to our authors who contributed to this issue. It has been a privilege working with you and sharing in the development of your wonderful insights, ideas, and experiments. We would also like to extend our enormous appreciation to the generosity of our peer reviewers and our newly formed external advisory panel, Helene Furjan, Lilian Chee, and Laurent Gutierrez, who helped guide and shape this issue. Additionally, we acknowledge the expertise of the journal's copy editor Christina Houen and Graphic Designer, Jo Bailey, and AADR, for their continued efforts to expand the journal's horizons.

We hope you enjoy this *idea journal* issue, *(Extra) Ordinary Interiors: Practising Critical Reflection*, and in your quiet hours at home, find (extra) ordinary insights as you turn and re-turn to its pages.

notes

- 01 Robin Evans, 'Figures, Doors and Passages,' *Architectural Design* 48, no. 4, 1978: 267-78.
- 02 Roland Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, translated and edited by Katrine Pilcher Keuneman (London and New York, NY: The Althone Press, 1966).
- 03 Xavier de Maistre, *Voyage Around My Room*, translated by Stephen Sartarelli (New York, NY: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1994).
- 04 De Maistre, *Voyage Around My Room*, vii.
- 05 An excerpt of an unpublished poem written during the 2020 COVID-19 level 4 lockdown in NZ by Julianna Preston.